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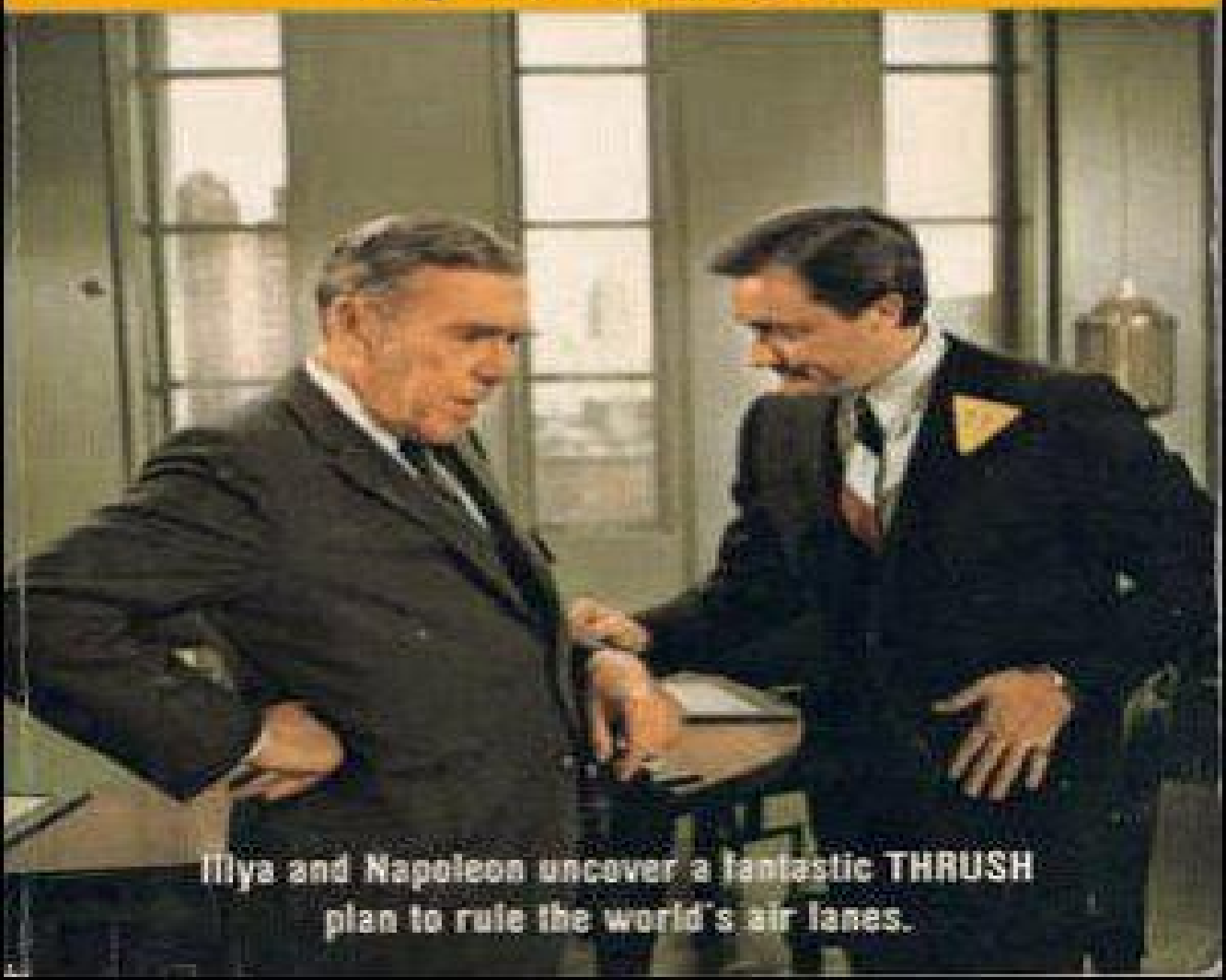
THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

NUMBER 23

The Finger in the Sky Affair

by Peter Leslie



Illya and Napoleon uncover a fantastic THRUSH plan to rule the world's air lanes.

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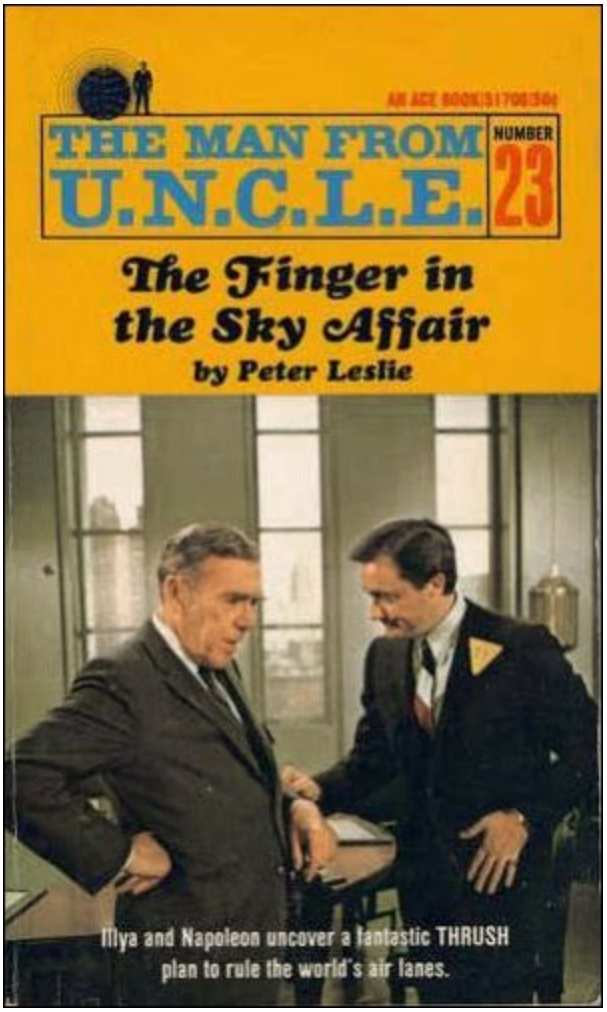
THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E.

No.5

Based on The Man from U.N.C.L.E. series characters
Another dramatic adventure by
Peter Leslie

THE FINGER IN THE SKY AFFAIR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THE MAN FROM U.N.C.L.E. No. 5

The Finger in the Sky Affair

PETER LESLIE

Based on the MGM television series
The Man from U.N.C.L.E.

CHAPTER ONE

TURNING ON THE HEAT

SCREAMING, the man pelted from the blazing wreckage towards the airport buildings and the control tower. Flame licked the trousers and sleeves of his lightweight suit, his tie was on fire, and thin trails of smoke streamed from his hair. Behind him, the inferno which lay across the main runway dwarfed the scarlet shapes of fire tender and ambulance racing towards it along the perimeter track.

To the horrified watchers in the tower and along the crowded observation terraces, the man's pumping legs seemed hardly to move him across the immensity of the apron (one of the ambulances had changed course and was dashing across the field to intercept him). 'Lie down, man! Lie down and roll,' the duty officer was shouting impotently behind his green glass window high in the tower. 'Lie down and roll on the ground to smother the flames, you idiot!' But the injured man was still running, staggering now, falling to the sun-drenched asphalte, dragging himself to his feet and stumbling doggedly on. When he was near enough for the airport workers pounding towards the crash to see his open mouth and staring eyes, a second explosion crumped from the centre of the wrecked plane. One of the lazily spinning fragments of incandescent debris brushed him lightly with its flaming tail as it flew past and dropped him once more to the ground. This time he did not get up.

Less than sixty seconds before, the huge Trident-Transcontinental Airways Flight T.C. 307 from New York – had been planing in from the west to land on the main runway at Nice airport dead on time after its four thousand mile journey. No cloud sullied the dark blue of the sky. No breeze ruffled the sea. The visibility was perfect and the friends, relatives and

onlookers thronging the terminal building in the heat of the early afternoon scarcely gave the silver plane a second look as it neared the finger of reclaimed land which carried the runway emptily out into the Mediterranean.

A porter driving an electric baggage trolley shaded his eyes against the glare of the sun and watched the aircraft take shape against the dark outline of Cap d'Antibes on the far side of the bay as it sank from the brassy bowl of the sky.

The pilot of a private Cessna waiting on the perimeter to take off throttled back his engines and glanced out to sea as the giant undercarriages and nose-wheel thumped down from the belly of the Trident. Holidaymakers on the beaches at Cros-de-Cagnes looked up as the great jet, air-braked now by seventy degrees of flap, roared overhead.

The plane's shadow undulated across the crowded little port, snaked over a storm beach of shingle and sped on along the sparkling sea. Soon it was hurtling towards the markers spaced out along the landward side of the runway.

As the dusty grasses flattened beneath the machine's 250-mph approach, the shadow and the substance drew inexorably nearer: slowly the speeding aircraft sank towards the tarmac, and as slowly the skimming shadow moved out towards the middle of the runway to join it. The only unusual thing about the whole operation was the rapidity of the junction: instead of levelling off, throttling back and settling gently down, the Trident continued flying at exactly the same speed and inclination until the two, the aircraft and its shadow, met together. It flew, as it were, straight into the runway…

As the shattering sound of the first impact split the hot afternoon, a mushroom of dust spurted from the dry ground. With its port oleo snapped, the jet bounced high into the air, slewed sideways when it crunched to the runway for the second time 400 feet further on, dug its port wingtip into the earth and cartwheeled for a further 250 feet in a slow arc before it slammed upside down across the tarmac and burst instantly into flames.

Ambulances and tenders were racing towards the stricken plane almost before the bloomp of the explosion was over, but it was outlined in fire long before they got near. On either side of the white-hot fuselage, the stressed metal of the triangular wings buckled and curled like charred paper in the fury of heat. Off to one side, the skeleton of the tall tailplane with its trefoil

of jet engines streamed flames and smoke into the air. And between the blazing mass of the machine itself and the point where it had first touched the runway, an irregular trail of spilled baggage, window frames and shattered fragments of auxiliary controls sprawled. Two hundred yards away in the middle of the airfield, one of the giant landing wheels rolled slowly to a halt, wobbled, and fell over on to one side.

And from the holocaust, just this one man emerged. Spewed on to the ground by who knows what chance of mechanics when the tail and the fuselage parted company during the Trident's last cartwheel, he picked himself up, flaming, and zig-zagged in panic away from the disaster.

The ambulance reached him just after he had been struck down by the second explosion. By the time they had smothered the flames and lifted him tenderly on to a stretcher his eyes were already glazing. Once on the way back to the terminal buildings he gave a deep groan, tried to sit up, and said quite clearly: 'It's too high…it's much too high…'

The nurse pushed him gently but firmly back on the pillows. 'Don't try to speak,' she said in French. 'You must not exert yourself.'

The burned man writhed beneath the red blankets. 'They…they…lifted up…the ground,' he panted. 'Not…far …enough below …I tell you I…*it's too high up*…' And his voice died away in an incoherent mumble.

'You must not speak, my friend,' the nurse said again. 'I am afraid I cannot understand your language – and anyway you have to conserve your strength. Be quiet now and rest…'

But the injured man continued to twist and turn, though his voice remained a low babble just above the threshold of hearing and he said nothing further that could be identified as words.

The other ambulances were halted a hundred metres away from the crash by the intense heat. One of the asbestos suited firemen lumbered towards them scissoring his arms in a gesture of negation. 'No use,' he called out. 'There's not a chance in hell. Apart from that one poor devil, the whole shoot must have fried in there like sausages. There's not even one chucked out on to the runway to die of a broken neck!' He. looked over at the dense pall of black smoke and shook his head.

'Oh, well,' the ambulance driver said philosophically, 'I guess it must have been pretty quick at that…How long before we can start getting the bodies away, then?'

‘A little while yet, mate. Even with the foam and that, the whole lot’s still practically incandescent. A messy job, I’m afraid. You’ll be rooting about in those ashes with the salvage boys for hours.’

‘Blast! I was off duty in a half hour, too. Jeanette and I were going to eat at the Rotonde. Still – better a late dinner than being a client for me and the salvage boys, eh?’

Twenty minutes later, the duty officer and one of the directors of the airport clambered out of a jeep at the scene of the crash. Weeping relatives and anxious friends had been taken care of, the curious had been dragooned away, cables had been sent and pressmen dealt with. And now all that remained of the Trident was a cruciform patch of smouldering debris through which the salvagers combed in antlike convolutions. Many of the corpses had already been removed and laid out in rows; many more, in whole or in part, had to be extricated from the tangle of incinerated fabric, melted foam rubber and scorched steel and aluminium.

‘I still cannot understand it,’ the duty officer was musing. ‘A perfect day, with everything in order. Everything. I was *talking* to the fellow. And he flew straight in. Smack into the ground. I *can’t* understand it…’

He picked up a charred woman’s handbag, opened it, took out a buckled address book, a lipstick and compact, and then, with a helpless gesture, dropped them back inside and carried the bag over to the growing pile of personal belongings at one side of the runway. The director was shaking the foam from a fire extinguisher off a child’s teddy bear. ‘You had no warning, Calvet, no warning at all that anything was wrong?’ he asked.

‘Nothing, *Monsieur le Directeur.* Nothing at all. One moment, he was about to touch down; the next moment – this.’ He spread his arms in a Gallic gesture at the scene before them.

Trembling through the hot air which still rose in waves from the litter of wreckage, the long line of sightseers’ cars illegally parked at the side of the motor road flanking the airport winked in the fierce sunlight. The director stared absently at them for a moment and then reached into his breast pocket for a piece of paper.

‘Ninety-seven passengers and the crew killed,’ he said slowly, adjusting his spectacles with forefinger and thumb, ‘and only a single survivor…that would be bad enough in all conscience. But this is the fifth crash

Transcontinental have had in the past two months – and the third they've suffered here at Nice.'

CHAPTER TWO

MR WAVERLY IS WORRIED

‘THE *fifth* crash in the past two months!’ Napoleon Solo echoed in astonishment. ‘But that’s fantastic! Way above any normal average for civil airlines as a whole, let alone one particular company…’

Alexander Waverly nodded. He selected a short briar pipe from a rack on his desk and began with a forefinger to feed tobacco into it from a circular tin. ‘The statistics are the least remarkable thing about it, I’m afraid,’ he said soberly.

‘You mean the crashes were – sabotage?’

‘Nothing as simple as ordinary sabotage. The report’s on its way up from the second floor. If you’ll be patient a moment, I can give you all the facts…’ Ramming the tobacco down into the bowl of the pipe with his thumb, Waverly rose and crossed to the window which gave on to the panoramic view of New York’s East River. From the middle of the tangle of roofs and walls, the United Nations building soared upwards like a huge glass replica of the matchbox in search of which he now vainly slapped at his pockets.

The window was the only one in the whole concealed fortress comprising the headquarters of U.N.C.L.E. – the United Network Command for Law and Enforcement. The rest of the three-storey enclave was masked by a front of crumbling brownstone buildings and buttressed at the ends by a public garage and a whitestone housing a restaurant and club.

Of the five sections making up the multi-national organization of the Command, Waverly headed the very top echelon: the Policy Department of

Section One. Napoleon Solo was his Chief Enforcement Officer – the leader of the operational elite, the men and women of Section Two.

Solo gazed with approval at the nubile figure of the blonde who knocked and came into Waverly's office a few moments later carrying a pink folder. The girl wore a tight black skirt and charcoal nylons. Her shirt was shadowed by the thrust of full breasts against the crisp poplin. The agent smiled and unconsciously raised a hand to smooth his dark hair as her grey eyes roved appreciatively over his athletic figure and clean-cut features. She placed the file on the desk, turned, and looked him boldly and provocatively in the eye as she left the room.

'Later, Mr. Solo. We have business to attend to.' Waverly's lean, middle-aged face creased into an expression of momentary irritation as he swung round from the window. He sat down at the desk, laid the unlit pipe beside the blotter, and opened the folder. It contained a half dozen sheets of meticulously typed paper stapled together through a red stick-on seal.

'And now,' he said dryly, glancing at the top sheet, 'perhaps – if you are sure I have your full attention – perhaps I can give you a run-down on this matter of the air crashes?'

'I'm sorry, sir. Please continue.'

'Very well. I shall give you the whole works. You may stop me if I dwell on anything you know already. First of all, what do you know of Transcontinental Airways?'

'T.C.A.? They're the next biggest domestic line to PanAm and T.W.A. And I guess they rate pretty highly on the international scene, too.'

'They do. They're among the six biggest in the world.'

'These crashes must be of some importance to them, in that case.'

'They are of importance to everybody, Mr. Solo. Take this last one at Nice three days ago. I have here a digest of the inquiry carried out jointly by the French ministry of aviation and T.C.A.'s own investigators – among whom we, too, had a man.' He flipped over two pages of the typescript and read aloud: '*We are of the unanimous opinion that no physical or mechanical reason can be found to which this disaster may be attributed. A playback of the wire recording in the fireproof black-box confirms that verbal communications between the pilot and the control tower were normal right up to the moment of the crash. The aircraft's three jet engines were all functioning perfectly. Our experts can find nothing wrong with the*

controls or control surfaces…The Trident was landing automatically – via the Murchison-Spears Automatic Landing Equipment housed in a container in the cockpit – and since the container was thrown clear of the flames, the investigators were able to test this also. Even after the impact, it was functioning one hundred per cent accurately…'

Napoleon Solo whistled softly but offered no other comment.

Waverly looked up at him over the papers in his hand. 'Exactly,' he said, leaning forward and selecting a rugged cherrywood from the pipe rack. 'Why, then, the crash? How can it have happened? – And in particular why did it happen again to T.C.A.?…As I have told you, this is the fifth disaster they have suffered in two months. You have doubtless read about the others without specifically noticing which airline they referred to.'

'I probably have, sir. Where were they?'

'Two of them were here in the U.S. …a plane blew up in mid-air; another stalled on take-off. But the remaining pair were carbon copies of the one we're discussing – absolutely identical. Both were at Nice, both involved Tridents, and in both cases, again, aircraft, crew and conditions appeared to be in perfect order.'

'That's certainly remarkable. And it's obviously far too – er – far-fetched for coincidence. It must be *some* kind of foul play…' Solo paused… 'Even so, I'm afraid I don't quite—'

'You don't see why *we* bother with it? You can't see how it affects U.N.C.L.E ?'

'No, sir – to be frank, I can't.'

'Then I'll tell you. There are two reasons. The first concerns the Murchison-Spears gear mentioned in the report. Know anything about it?'

'It's got a bit of a lead on the stuff most of the airlines use, hasn't it?'

'Yes, B.E.A., B.O.A.C., PanAm and most of the European companies use Smiths-Elliott-Bendix gear. This fixes the plane on a "localizer" beam from the landing strip which puts it in line with the runway and then automatically controls its height and glide angle until the moment of touchdown. But the crew still have to control the "roll" of the wings.'

'Of course. I remember reading—'

'But in the case of the Murchison-Spears equipment, this factor too becomes automatically controlled – in fact the aircraft is *completely* under

automatic direction when it lands.’

‘How often are these boxes of tricks used, sir?’

‘The Smiths-Elliott-Bendix gear is still used mainly for fog landings, and sometimes at night. But T.C.A. have gone out on a limb with the Murchison-Spears equipment – at present they are the only airline fitted with it – and they use it as company policy on all planes for all landings at anytime.’

‘But isn’t there some kind of tie-up—?’

Waverly nodded his head and began to stuff tobacco into the bowl of the cherrywood. He turned back one page and glanced at the typed sheet before speaking.

‘T.C.A. and Murchison-Spears are controlled through the same holding company,’ he said. ‘The electronics firm is a joint Anglo-American corporation – with the governments of the two countries between them holding forty-nine per cent of the shares.’

‘Only forty-nine per cent?’

‘Yes – the remaining fifty-one was carefully split among very many small investors as the directors didn’t wish to appear to be government *controlled.* And the authorities of each country agreed…but of course the equipment was so good that nobody envisaged a situation where a buyers’ market might set in. Yet that’s exactly what the high accident rate of planes using the device has caused: there’s been a loss of public confidence in the gear and the shares are plunging.’

‘Is anybody buying?’ Solo asked.

‘Not obviously. But it is conceivable that, through careful buying by nominees, an evilly intentioned organization could in fact gain control of the company and its secrets.’

‘And this would mean gaining control also of T.C.A.?’

‘Yes, it would. Which brings me to the second reason why we are interested. Because, you see, T.C.A. holds the franchise to transport to the U.S. a rare fissionable material extracted from a vein of igneous rock in the Maritime Alps behind Nice…’

Solo frowned. ‘Even so, sir,’ he objected, ‘I can hardly see – You mentioned “an evilly intentioned organization”. Do you mean an organization like THRUSH?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Well, excuse my ignorance, but I can’t see how such an eventuality would help them. THRUSH’s aim is world domination, right? – Well, how does gaining control of an airline and a company which manufactures a sophisticated automatic pilot advance this aim?’

Solo’s chief put down his pipe and rose to his feet. He began to pace up and down the long room. ‘You’re too inclined to view things in blacks and whites, Mr. Solo,’ he said. ‘The international power game is infinitely complex and – to use your own word – infinitely sophisticated. Those of us who have in any way to do with its policies are like the players in a monster game of chess, always trying to think nine moves ahead. And the real reason for any move is never what it appears to be on the surface. Why – you must have asked yourself – do the governments, for instance, not buy up the plunging shares themselves?’

‘The thought had occurred to me,’ Solo admitted.

‘Because such a move could not be kept secret – and the repercussions, on other shares, on the market, on the economies of the two countries, would be incalculable. The effect of an apparent move to gloss over a para-military failure is far-reaching…apart from which it might not succeed!’

‘I see.’

‘So far as THRUSH is concerned, this conspiracy – if such it is – would not be designed to advance their plans *directly;* it would be more in the nature of a fund-raising operation. They do need funds, you know! Despite the financial power of some of their Council members, their schemes have to be financed.’

‘So I would imagine, sir.’

‘And gaining control of Murchison-Spears at a comparatively low outlay would help in this direction. More importantly, they would have a foot – owning T.C.A. – firmly in the enemy camp. And worst of all, a single small canister of that nuclear material – if “accidentally” misrouted to certain Eastern countries, for example – could bring them enormous revenue. Even if they did not intend to make use of its secrets themselves.’

‘So in fact it’s up to us to stop them?’

‘It’s up to *you,* Mr. Solo,’ Waverly corrected with a dry smile. ‘You and any other Enforcement Agents you may wish to assign…’

CHAPTER THREE

A QUESTION OF ASKING QUESTIONS

ILLYA NICKOVETCH KURYAKIN was young, tow-haired, blue eyed and of a solemn expression. He was five feet ten inches tall. He was born in Russia. And next to Napoleon Solo he was the most valued and trusted of all the Enforcement Agents in Section Two of U.N.C.L.E.

Illya was straightening a dark crimson knitted silk tie in the cheval glass of his wardrobe when the buzzer of his pocket transmitter sounded its urgent summons from the top of the bureau. He reached the tiny device in two strides, picked it up, thumbed the button and spoke.

‘Channel open,’ he said.

The voice of the girl in the Communications Section at U.N.C.L.E. headquarters came flatly from the receiver. ‘As soon as possible, please. Priority One. Head of Section One.’

‘Right. Subject?’

‘Something new, I believe. May I please have your E.T.A.?’

‘Twenty minutes from now,’ the Russian said crisply. He snapped off the radio, put it in the breast pocket of his light grey suit, and shut the door of the wardrobe on the meticulously arranged rows of jackets, trousers, shirts, shoes and ties inside. Hesitating, he looked around the rest of the one-room apartment. Unlike the wardrobe, it was in chaos. The divan bed was unmade, papers strewed the bedside table, the chairs and part of the floor. There were books, opened and unopened, everywhere. Maps and sheets of graph paper were spread over the hi-fi and the television receiver. On a low coffee table, a paper sack of groceries spilled its contents among the used crockery of Illya’s breakfast.

The agent took a half step towards the table, looked at his watch, shrugged, and then – with a resigned gesture – turned his back on the room and went out the front door.

It was windy for August and the bright sunshine was not too warm. He walked the half block to his car with the breeze whipping his pale, forward-brushed hair off his forehead, collected his ticket from under the screenwiper, and drove away from the fire-plug where he had parked earlier in the morning. It took him twelve minutes to get to the shabby block hiding the headquarters of U.N.C.L.E.

He swung the car into the garage at the end of the row of brownstones, left it with the attendant, and walked out into the street again. Like every building on the block, including the seedy shops and the apartments above them, the garage was a front. U.N.C.L.E.'s basic personnel gained admission to the steel-shelled headquarters through the men's and women's locker rooms in the garage itself; such few official visitors as the organization had were shown to a door above the club in the whitestone at the far end of the block. But the Enforcement Agents on their rare visits to base used the third entrance inside Del Floria's tailor shop.

There were two other entrances: an underwater channel leading from the basement to the East River; and a fifth way in that was known only to Mr. Waverly and his four colleagues of Section One.

Illya walked half-way down the brownstone frontage and went in Del Floria's door. The dimly lit front room was damp with steam from the pressing machine and at first the old man did not see him. Then he looked up and caught sight of the Russian standing over against the rail of suits basted ready for fittings. He opened the two white, padded halves of the big machine and hurried over with a smile, the orange tape measure draped round his neck swinging as he went.

'Mr. Kuryakin!' he beamed. 'Some days it is since I see you. I am hoping you do well. Everything, she is fine, yes?'

'Hallo, Del,' Illya said easily. 'Yes, I'm fine, thanks. How are you?… There is some kind of a panic on up there, so I am afraid that I have to hurry. See you later, maybe?'

He took off his jacket and handed it to the tailor as though he wanted it to be pressed, passing through to the fitting booths in back of the shop. Del Floria slung the garment over one arm and pressed a button set into the side

of the pressing machine. In the third cubicle, Illya drew across the curtain and twisted an ordinary-looking brass hook on the back wall.

The wall swung silently inwards and he walked through into the Admissions foyer of U.N.C.L.E. headquarters.

The girl at the reception desk was a redhead. She had watched the agent's approach through the tailor's shop on her T.V. monitor screen and now she looked up with a five-star smile shining through her freckles. 'Morning, Illya,' she said cheerfully. 'You're a minute early, you know: the old man'll be pleased!'

Kuryakin nodded seriously. The fact that he found his job of more importance than human relationships did not make his boyish charm any the less compelling on the personable young women with whom U.N.C.L.E. was liberally staffed.

'Good morning, Miss Merrell,' he said. 'I was fortunate with the lights today in the crosstown traffic. Do you have a badge for me?'

'Do I!' the girl said. 'I have a whole chestful, if you must know. But I'd be out on my ear if I mentioned it!' She reached into a drawer of her desk and brought out a small white badge which she pinned carefully to his shirtfront, just below the shoulder. 'Usually it's lapels, of course,' she told him. 'I wonder if you'd even notice if I'd stuck you with it?'

Illya smiled, an exercise that lit up his entire face. 'Probably not,' he said politely. 'I should most likely have been too busy admiring the contours of the scenery to notice such pinpricks…'

'Gee,' the redheaded girl breathed as she watched him cross the foyer to the elevators, 'maybe one day he'll get around to call me Barbara…'

But the agent, absent-mindedly fingering the white badge on the lift taking him to the third floor, was wondering what could have been the reason for the unexpected call on what should have been a free day. His taste, as it happened, inclined towards brunettes.

(The white badge was more important than it looked. Each individual entering the headquarters – staff, outposted personnel or visitor – was equipped with a badge every time he or she came in. And badges of different colours admitted to different levels of the organization. Thus a red badge restricted its wearer to the entrance floor, where only routine operations were carried out; a yellow badge permitted entry to this floor and also to the communications and electronic centres on the floor above; and

the Policy and Operations Sections on the top storey were reserved for white badges. The small shields themselves were activated by a chemical on the tips of the receptionists' fingers – and any badge thus treated which strayed into the wrong part of the building would immediately trip an alarm setting off winking red danger lights on every desk in the headquarters, while steel doors slid shut to divide the place into compartments in which capture of the interloper would be that much easier. Napoleon Solo had been there once when a too-curious columnist had strayed from the course marked out for him and caused the whole system to swing into operation. 'It was hell,' he told Illya afterwards. 'Just like being on a torpedoed ship, with the watertight doors closing and bells ringing their heads off all over…')

The blonde in the black skirt took Kuryakin into Waverly's office at once. Solo was still there, and the blonde appeared to have some difficulty in deciding which man to look at as she returned to the outer office.

'What we're faced with here, Mr. Kuryakin,' Waverly said after Solo had put Illya in the picture, 'is, as usual, a matter of time – time in which to discover how these air crashes occurred; time to see all the persons involved; time to work out some way of preventing a repetition of the disasters. And of course time is what we do not have. If it is indeed THRUSH behind the whole thing, then it must be effectively countered at once. At once – before public confidence drops further.'

'It seems to me,' Solo said, 'assuming the planes are being sabotaged, that is – it seems to me we have to find out first of all just how this is being done.'

'I agree, Napoleon,' Illya said. 'From what Mr. Waverly has told us, I assume there is no evidence of any tampering with the planes. Is there likely to be any in the near future?'

'I wouldn't count on it,' Waverly said morosely. 'I've told you the results of the preliminary inquiry. The full investigation – where they gather together every fragment of the wrecked plane and marry it up with its neighbour to try and see what went wrong where – that'll take weeks. And it's not a job that you can rush, by its very nature. If you lean too heavily on the man doing the reconstruction, he may in his haste destroy the very fragment holding the clue to the whole thing!'

'I see. Then it seems our only lead is the survivors. Are there many?'

Waverly sighed. His lined face looked suddenly tired and old in the harsh light streaming in through the window from Queens. ‘From the five crashes,’ he said, abstracting a sheet of paper from the folder which still lay on his desk, ‘there are precisely five survivors.’

‘How do they relate?’ Solo asked.

‘A stewardess from the second Nice disaster – there were no survivors from the first. This burned fellow from the third crash there. And a steward and two passengers from one of the American crashes.’

‘Which one, sir?’

‘The aircraft that stalled on take-off. A D.C. 6, it was. At Chicago.’

‘No survivors from the other?’

‘None at all. It was a pressurised 707 that blew up in mid-air, somewhere over California, I believe.’

‘Do we have any technical data, Mr. Waverly, on the supposed causes of these two American crashes?’ Illya asked. ‘I mean, were they as incomprehensible as the three at Nice?’

‘There was no provable hypothesis – nothing in the nature of evidence that would convince an inquiry tribunal. But I understand Maximilian Plant – he’s the head of T.C.A., as I expect you know – I understand he has a few ideas on what *may* have happened. I said we’d send somebody over to see him at their H.Q. on Fifth Avenue, right?’

‘Right, sir,’ Solo said. ‘I’ll go over myself. Now, if you can let us have the names and addresses of these survivors, we’ll get on to them right away.’

Waverly adjusted his spectacles and read from the paper:

‘James Lester, steward, suffered from severe burns; now back at his home: 1362 Venice Avenue, Cicero, Illinois. Olive MacTaggart, passenger, multiple injuries and severe burns; still in St. Mary’s Hospital, Chicago. Enrico Spaggia, passenger, two broken legs and second-degree burns; back at home in Worsthome Court, State Street, Wilmington, Delaware…That’s the three in this country. In France, you have the stewardess, Andrea Bergen, and the poor fellow who ran out of the fire the other day – he hasn’t recovered consciousness yet.’

Solo had been taking notes. He looked up. ‘Where can we find these two?’ he inquired.

‘The girl’s just come out of hospital – she was very badly knocked about. You can find out her address in Nice from the T.C.A. bureau at the airport there. The man, Foster Andersen, he’s in the Anglo-American hospital between Nice and Villefranche.’

‘Okay,’ Solo said. ‘Illya – will you handle the two at Nice? I’ll look after Maximilian Plant and the three here…’

Waverly stared at the row of five enamel buttons inset in the top of his desk. After a moment he jabbed a finger at the yellow one in the middle. There was an amplified click and then the blonde’s disembodied voice:

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Get me General Hartz at the Pentagon,’ Waverly barked at the invisible microphones. He scowled at the pipe rack while he was waiting for the connection and then, rejecting its entire contents with a shake of his head, hauled an old Meerschaum from the pocket of his baggy tweed jacket and placed it unlit between his teeth. A red indicator light was flashing on the wall.

‘Yes?’ the Head of Section One said into the air.

‘General Hartz on the line, Mr. Waverly.’

‘Put him on.’

Another click; a faint, high, singing noise. And then:

‘Alex? How’s tricks, you old rascal! What can I do for you?’

‘I want an army jet, Number One Priority, to ferry an operative to Nice, France, as soon as possible, David.’

‘Can do, as it’s for you. How soon is “as soon as possible”?’

‘Leaving here as of now.’

‘Okay. Where are we gonna pick him up?’

‘I’ll fly him to you by helicopter from the roof of this building. Can you have the plane ready by the time he gets to you?’

‘Sure thing, Alex. He’ll carry the usual identification?’

‘Naturally. His name is Kuryakin – and thanks, David.’

‘Be my guest…Oh, and Alex – golf on Sunday?’

‘Golf on Sunday,’ Waverly said. ‘As usual.’

Illya was on his feet, ready to go. ‘I’ll draw some equipment from the armoury, arrange a cover with Personnel, and indent for some funds at the

cashier's office,' he said.

Waverly nodded. 'I'll have the aircraft on the roof in ten minutes,' he said. 'You'll keep in touch with Mr. Solo through Station M?'

'Yes, sir. Shall I ask them to try and get me a wavelength?'

'No. Not at first, anyway. Not worth it. Let them transmit.'

It was the agent's turn to nod. 'There is just one other thing,' he added diffidently. 'Forgive me for mentioning the obvious, but—'

'What is it, Illya ?' Solo asked, sensing the Russian's reluctance.

'Well, it's just – I'm sure it has been checked – but…I suppose we do know the enemy here *is* THRUSH? – I mean, there isn't a chance that the sabotage was *personally* directed? There weren't passengers on those planes whose deaths would benefit people? There have been men mad enough to destroy a whole plane-load of innocent people to get one individual before now.'

'I'm glad you asked that question, Mr. Kuryakin,' Waverly said without in any way revealing that he knew the remark was a cliché. 'In truth, I should have remembered to tell you: both the F.B.I., in the case of the two domestic crashes, and the C.I.A., in the case of the others, have made the most exhaustive inquiries along the lines you mention. And in every case they have drawn a blank. I think you can rule the idea out for all practical purposes…'

'Thank you, sir. It was just that I wished to make sure—'

'Quite, quite, quite. You did quite right to ask…And now off you go, the two of you. I suggest that you leave Plant to the last, Mr. Solo: I should like to have some facts about that Chicago crash on my desk as soon as possible…Mr. Kuryakin – question these two people in Nice as closely as you can about *every* recollection of the crashes they have. No matter how insignificant it may seem—'

He broke off as the blonde entered with a word of apology and laid on his desk an envelope with the *Urgent – Top Secret* seal in red. He slit the flap with a paper knife and drew out the single sheet of paper it contained.

'Correction, please, gentlemen,' he said in an expressionless voice a moment later. 'For "question these two people" read "question that person". I have just heard that Foster Andersen has died without regaining consciousness…'

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GIRL ON THE PROMENADE DES ANGLAIS

‘This is the last call for passengers on Air France Flight A.F./951 – the Caravelle departing at 1410 hours for London. Passengers who have checked in with their baggage please assemble at Exit No. 3 in the Departure Lounge…This is the last call for passengers…’

The boxy, amplified voice echoed round the concourse of the modernistic *Aeroport Nice-Côte d’ Azur.* Illya Kuryakin stood beside a huge concrete circle ablaze with begonias, zinnias and salvia, looking at the row of airline offices, flower-shops and confectionery kiosks which lined the vast hall. Around him, shrill with anxiety or indecision, the high season holiday crowd milled. Transcontinental Airways housed their bureau between B.E.A. and the stairway to the cloakrooms – under a gallery leading past counters of cashmere cardigans and bottles of scent to the restaurant. The agent strolled across to quiz the girl behind the *guichet.*

‘Andrea Bergen?’ she repeated. ‘Yes, of course I can give you her address. It’s in an apartment block just off the Avenue Malaussena – but I’m afraid you won’t find her there.’

‘Oh. Why not? I thought she had come out of hospital.’

‘She has, poor dear. But she’s still in a wheelchair – completely crippled. She can’t do a thing for herself, so she’s being looked after by a friend.’

‘Do you know how I can get in touch with the friend? It’s rather important.’

‘Yes, I do. She works for T.C.A. too. I don’t have her address in Nice right here – could you hang on a moment?’ The girl disappeared into a back room and he heard her talking to someone behind the frosted glass partition.

A moment later she was back, her face covered in smiles. ‘You’re in luck,’ she said. ‘Sherry’s actually here. She’s on a short stand-off between shifts and it wasn’t worth going home. You’ll find her having a coffee on the terrace outside the restaurant upstairs.’

‘Is she a stewardess too?’

‘No. She’s Ground Staff Liaison, but the uniform’s the same. It’ll probably be the only T.C.A. uniform up there. Her name’s Rogers – Sheridan Rogers.’

Illya thanked the girl for her help and walked away past the queues of passengers waiting to put their baggage on the weighing machines by the check-in desks. At the top of the wide, shallow staircase he paused for a moment to look back at the ant-like complexities of the crowd below. Between Arrivals and Departures they flooded the post office and *bureau de change*, besieged the semicircular information desk, overflowed the seats, summoned porters with an imperious finger, or merely stood about in disconsolate groups centred on piles of luggage. From the glass doors of the Customs hall a file of pale-faced arrivals emerged hesitantly to submit themselves to the greetings of tanned men in espadrilles and dark glasses. Up here beneath the geometric planes of the great roof, the acoustics of the place muted the babble of voices and amplified the sound of feet.

The warm air of the restaurant was redolent of cigars, roast meats and garlic. On the wide terrace outside, Illya found Sheridan Rogers sitting over a tiny coffee and a large cognac. She had wide, wide blue eyes and a smile that wrinkled her nose and creased the flesh at each side of her face. Above the white T.C.A. uniform with its navy piping, her *gamine*-cut hair looked exceptionally dark.

The Russian introduced himself as a Federal accidents investigation officer. He drew a chair up to her table and gave her an edited account of the difficulties facing them in establishing what had caused the accidents. ‘And so you see, Miss Rogers,’ he concluded, ‘how very important it is for us to have at first hand the recollections of all survivors – however painful they may be, however unimportant the things they remember may seem.’

The girl stared out across the apron, the runway, and the strip of dusty turf beyond which the sea stretched sparkling from Cap Ferrat to Cap d’Antibes. A group of racing dinghies heeled white sails over to a breeze drifting in from the west.

‘To be honest,’ she said at last, screwing up her eyes against the glare of the lunch-time sun, ‘I’d much prefer for her not to be troubled. She’s still pretty ill. And of course profoundly shocked. To be the only survivor…If she hadn’t gotten it into her head to check something in the baggage compartment…But I understand you have your duty to carry out.’

‘It’s not only that,’ Illya said, pressing his advantage. ‘The crashes *may* be due to sabotage. If so, we have to stop the same thing happening to other people…don’t we?’

‘I guess so. I tell you what I’ll do: I’ll give you the phone number of my apartment and you can call Andrea. If she agrees to see you, I’ll wheel her out on to the Promenade des Anglais early this evening – it’s only a block from my place in the Rue Massena. Then you can talk to her for a moment, and afterwards we’ll let you buy us a cocktail at one of the pavement cafés. Okay?’

‘Splendid,’ the agent said warmly. ‘Let me buy you another cognac now, before you give me the number…

‘Air France announce the departure of their Flight A.F./951 for London,’ the voice of the girl announcer twanged from the P.A. speaker above their heads.

Together, they watched the slim, long-nosed Caravelle, with its twin tail-jets, trundle to the end of the runway, swing round, and then surge forward for the take-off with a scream of power. Once off the ground, the elegant machine roared into the sky in a steep climbing turn which left a double plume of black exhaust smoke hanging in the air over the beaches of Nice.

‘My goodness,’ Illya said, ‘they take them up like a lift, don’t they!’

They watched the superb plane turn out at sea and fly back parallel to the coast – a silver dart winking in the bright sun. Almost before it had reached operational height, an aircraft precisely similar was sinking to the runway from the sky over Cagnes.

Before they had finished their drinks, Illya had learned that Sheridan Rogers was 25 years old, that she had been born in Seattle and brought up in Paris, where her father was a consular official, and that she had been working for T.C.A. in Nice for nearly two years. He had also written down on a piece of paper the telephone number of her apartment. Presently, he excused himself and went to make the call.

Andrea Bergen's voice was deep and husky, with a trace of an accent he couldn't place. At first she was most unwilling to see him at all. 'I am much – how do you say? – bashed around,' she said. 'I do not wish to be seen in this state. Besides, I feel very ill. My nerves are poor. I have no confidence.'

'I only want to talk to you for two minutes, Miss Bergen. There is no need for anyone to see you at all. We can talk in the open air, on the promenade, if you like.'

'But what can I say that will be of any interest to you?'

'Anything you say about the crash will be of interest to me. Anything at all, I promise you.'

'But I remember nothing. I am in the baggage compartment because I think I hear some loose things. I find I am wrong, and – poof! Everything is darkness. How can this help?'

'It's not your actual recollection of the impact – perhaps I did not make myself clear – but rather of the few moments immediately before it. If you were in the compartment as the plane was landing, I assume you had to ask permission of the Captain – you should have been sitting down with a safety belt on, after all. Did you ask?'

'I – let me – Yes! Yes, I did.'

'Good. Did you ask over the intercom or did you go up front?'

'I went myself.'

'There you are, you see. You are being interesting already…Now while you were there, did you hear any of the crew say anything – even the tiniest, most insignificant remark – that you can remember, or that you feel might be useful?'

'I don't think I…Wait a minute…I – No, there was some little thing… Yes. The Flight Engineer. He made a remark I couldn't quite understand. Something about being surprised by a reading – I can't quite…'

'Look, Miss Bergen: never mind now. This is intensely interesting to me. It's exactly the kind of thing I'm looking for. Meet me with Sheridan tonight, as I asked…and think about it. Try to recall everything the Engineer said, every inflection, will you?'

'I suppose so.' The voice was still dubious. 'But you'll have to excuse me if I wear a scarf over my head and face. I'm…rather badly scarred, you see…'

Illya hung up and went back to make arrangements with Sherry Rogers. Outside the kiosk, he nearly stumbled over a small, dark man waiting to enter the booth. The Russian smiled pleasantly in apology, but the man – Illya thought he had seen him earlier, somewhere in the building – pushed past and slammed the door with a scowl.

Later, when the girl had gone back on duty, he left the terminal building to see about hiring a car. After the cool depths of the main hall, the blare of heat outside was stunning. Between the spiky palms, yucca, agave and oleander bushes bordered the huge parking area in greens and corals and scarlets. Two *gendarmes* in khaki shirts blotched with dark stains across the shoulders regulated the traffic past the glass entrance doors. Beyond, coachwork massed in martial rows glittered in the fierce light.

The plastic upholstery on the hired Peugeot 404 was blisteringly hot. Illya was glad to wind down the windows, steer the car round the cloverleaf connecting the airport complex with the dual carriageway coastal road, and accelerate away towards Nice in an attempt to stir some freshness into the tepid air.

Later, not long before his rendezvous with Sheridan Rogers on the Promenade des Anglais, occasional gusts of wind began to agitate the foliage of flowering shrubs planted along the central strip of the famous street.

The girl came into sight some way along the wide pavement between the roadway and the beach. She was wearing pearl grey pants which clung to her long legs and a flowered silk shirt against which the points of her small breasts tilted provocatively. Illya watched her threading the wheelchair through the crowd of holidaymakers with unabashed pleasure. Andrea Bergen still had one arm in plaster. The lower half of her body was covered with a light rug and her head, swathed in chiffon, was bent so that her face was invisible. She acknowledged Sheridan Rogers' introduction in a low voice without looking up.

'I'll leave you two together for a few moments,' Sherry said tactfully. 'I have to change some magazines at the kiosk over there: the girl must have given me someone else's this morning…'

She had almost reached the gaily coloured paper stall when a big woman in an orange towelling beach-robe collided with her and sent the armful of journals flying.

‘Excuse me one moment,’ Illya said to the crippled girl in the wheelchair. ‘I’ll be right back…’

He hurried over and helped Sherry retrieve the magazines from a bed of scarlet and mauve geraniums. ‘Clumsy bitch!’ the girl said with a forgiving smile. ‘And she didn’t even offer to stop and pick them up…thank you so much, Mr. Kuryakin. Now you run along back to Andrea and I’ll see you for that apéritif in a few minutes.’

The agent turned back – and himself almost collided for the second time with the small, dark man he had seen outside the telephone booth at the airport. The wheelchair had rolled back slightly into the shelter of an ornamental shrubbery, where it was less likely to obstruct the dense crowds sauntering up and down the promenade. Late bathers still climbed the stairs from the Sporting, the Lido and the Ruhl-Plage, but the beach was nearly deserted and waiters had already dismantled most of the umbrellas and mattresses ranked along the carefully raked shingle. The sea was violet, only just strong enough to flop over into token waves at the edge, and the sun had vanished some time ago behind the pale cliffs of hotels and apartment houses fringing the five-mile sweep of the Baie des Anges.

Illya pulled up one of the chairs with which the pavement was bordered and sat down slightly behind the wheelchair. ‘Sorry about that, Miss Bergen,’ he said. ‘Now, I shan’t keep you long – and believe me I do realize how painful for you it must be to recall the accident. But you must accept my word for it that it *is* necessary.’

The girl in the wheelchair sat with bowed head and made no reply.

‘All I want to ask you,’ he continued, ‘is, as I said, to make a very, very strong effort to remember every single thing you heard that Flight Engineer say.’

He paused. But the swathed figure before him still showed no sign of answering.

‘On the telephone,’ the agent prompted, ‘you mentioned something about a reading that surprised him. Did he say what reading that was?’

For the third time he waited. And again there was no reply – or indeed any evidence that the girl had heard him speak at all. He leaned forward so that his face was just behind her shoulder. ‘Miss Bergen,’ he said. ‘Miss Bergen – do you hear me …?’

Behind the shrubbery, cars locked in the evening traffic jam hooted impatiently.

Illya reached over and touched Andrea Bergen on the arm – then, with a smothered exclamation, he sprang to his feet and tore the chiffon scarf away from her head.

From the scarred face, staring eyeballs bulged sightlessly at the sea. A blackened tongue poked obscenely from between the drawn back lips. And the length of piano wire with its two polished wood ends lay buried deep in the swollen folds of the dead girl’s neck…

CHAPTER FIVE

A SURPRISE FOR NAPOLEON SOLO

EVEN in mid-August, there was an edge to the inevitable wind slicing south across Lakeshore Drive and Solo pressed the button to raise the passenger window on the hired Chevrolet as he left the congestion of downtown Chicago and headed for the suburb of Cicero. Far above his head, the street lights roosted on their iron gantries, a double line of futuristic birds marking the waterfront in dwindling perspective.

It was just after dark and the traffic was light. The cool evening seemed to have kept most of the commuters indoors eating or watching television.

Venice Avenue was a long, looping street curving out – it seemed to Solo – practically to Alaska before he hit the thirteen hundred block. The middle-class respectability of its faded villas and stained concrete apartment towers seemed a far cry from the rumbustious free-for-all of Prohibition, when Cicero had been something very like a private state for Capone.

‘You come right on over, Mr. Solo,’ James Lester had said when the agent telephoned earlier. ‘I’m still wound round with these pesky dressings and the burns give me gyp every time I move – but no darned bandage is going to stop J. H. V. Lester from bending his elbow! I got me a good story to tell, and until the doc allows me back into a saloon, the next best thing is to have a real good listener over at the apartment while I let a few fingers of rye slide down my craw!’

‘You’re sure it won’t inconvenience you?’ Solo had asked.

‘Not on your life! My daughter lives in Winnipeg, my wife – rest her soul! – died ten years ago, and I’m all alone here. Until I can get back to

work again, drinking in good company is my occupation. Care to help me in my job?'

With a mental grimace at the man's archaic slang and archly ingratiating manner, Solo pulled up outside a liquor store across the street from Lester's address. A few minutes later, grasping a wrapped fifth of Seagram's V.O., he was standing outside the survivor's door. 1362 was a crumbling old house divided into three apartments, to reach which visitors had to negotiate rusty iron gates, a weed-grown driveway and a communal hall smelling of dust. The agent pushed the illuminated button outside the second-floor plaque labelling the steward's home. A double chime sounded within.

As he waited for the door to be opened, Solo glanced idly at the cracked cream distemper of the landing walls. A gleam of brightness in the low-wattage light caught his attention on the far side of the door. Thumbing the button for the second time, he paced across.

Bent slightly outwards from the lintel, a telephone company's lead was reflecting the illumination via a bright core exposed by whoever had recently severed the wire.

With a muttered exclamation, Solo tried the door. It was securely locked. He leaned his ear against the top panel and rapped with his knuckles. No sound came from inside the apartment. Finally, he fished a small silver cylinder rather like a pocket torch from his breast pocket and unscrewed the top. From it he took a selection of thin, delicate but extremely strong instruments in stainless steel. Studying the keyhole for a moment, he chose one and inserted it. It wouldn't turn. Selecting another, he pushed that slowly into the aperture and twisted. He had to manoeuvre it this way and that, but at length it clicked sharply and the tumblers dropped home. A gun had somehow appeared in Solo's hand. Pushing off the safety catch, he turned the handle, flung open the door and walked into the apartment.

It was a small place. A hallway with a shower off it, one large, untidy room with an unmade bed and dirty dishes on the table, a tiny kitchen – and that was all. A wheelback cottage chair lay overturned on the rucked-up carpet.

Lester was in the shower room. He had been brutally beaten about the head and body, the clothes torn half off his back, the dressings ripped from his burns and hurled to the ground. Afterwards – after he had been knocked insensible, Solo hoped – his murderers had filled the tub under the shower

and held his head under water until he drowned. Judging from the expression on the dead man's face, and from the state of the half-healed wounds, his end had been an agonising one.

Solo's face was very grim as he dragged the sodden body into the living room, lifted it on to the bed and pressed down the lids to close the frightened eyes. It would be pointless to search the place; there was nothing he could do – not even call the police, since the telephone wires were cut.

He ran down the stairs, climbed into the Chevrolet, executed a tight U-turn with screaming tyres and headed back for Chicago as fast as he could.

St. Mary's Hospital was on the far side of town, beyond the stockyards. Solo heard the sirens while he was still a mile away. He flashed a very special pass at the uniformed State Trooper who was keeping the traffic moving and coasted to a halt behind the line of police cars, ambulances and fire appliances grouped around the gates. Over the heads of a dense crowd of sightseers flame licked sporadically at the underside of smoke bellying into the night sky.

The agent pushed his way through the babble of voices. '…They tried from the inside but there wasn't a chance'…'gotten two of them out through a window'…'First thing I knew, my screen door was in the parlour!'…'broken glass all over the sidewalk right down the eleven hundred block…' He went up to the Fire Chief and showed his pass again. 'What happened?' he asked.

The big man pushed his scuttle-shaped helmet to the back of his head and mopped his scarlet brow with a handkerchief. 'Search me, mister,' he said. 'I guess that's for the accident investigators to find out. All I'm trying to do is stop it getting worse.' From between two wings of the rambling, four-storey building, an avalanche of rubble slanted to the ground. Over it, asbestos-suited men of the disaster squad picked their way between the flames to lever at half buried beams. There was the familiar smell of brick dust, plaster and charred wood to catch at the throat.

'You mistake me, Chief,' Solo said. 'I wasn't looking for *causes:* I don't know what happened – at all.'

The big man turned and looked at him, reflections from the fire chasing expressions across his craggy face. 'Explosion,' he said gruffly at last. 'Could be a gas main, could be a crashing airplane, could be oxygen bottles – though I doubt it; the damage is too great.'

‘What part of the hospital did it affect?’

‘Women’s surgical ward. There were twenty-three of them in there – plus a Sister and five nurses, poor bitches. All we’ve got out so far are two nurses and half a patient, and they’re all dead.’ He gestured towards three sheeted figures lying behind an ambulance, and then cupped his hands to shout at a section of firemen hauling a hose towards the rubble. *‘Franklyn, Harman – tell Two Section for Chrissake to take the table round to the other side of the wing, give these guys some cover from on top…’*

‘What chance have you got of getting the others out?’

‘Haven’t a hope in hell. This is an old building, mister. Wood beams, bricks, plaster. Not like one of your concrete places with steel frames – you got a chance there, the girders hold the rubble away from corners and intersections and such. But here…’ he shrugged sadly. ‘The explosion hit the Sister’s office in the middle of the ward, it seems, and up she went – then down she came with two storeys and the roof and water tanks and all caved in on her.’ He shrugged again. ‘And then the fire…. No, I guess the ones that weren’t blown up were buried, crushed to death or suffocated. And the ones that didn’t go that way would’ve been burned anyway…We’re doin’ what we can, but the main job’s really to stop the fire spreading now. I’ve got the rest of the place evacuated on the lawns at the other side of the building.’

Solo watched firemen direct hoses to tamp down the flames barring the path of salvage workers trying to burrow under a tangle of bricks and boards. A group of them gathered round a tunnel in the wreckage and the interest of the watching crowd quickened. Voices died away. The crackle of flames sounded suddenly louder. There was a flurry of movement among the rescuers perched high on the rubble slope; they were extricating something or somebody. Then a steel-helmeted man in oilskins stepped down a few feet, looked over towards the Chief, and shook his head definitively. A sigh wavered across the crowd – and once more the hum of voices rose.

‘Could it have been sabotage?’ Solo asked.

‘Sabotage?’

‘Dynamite, plastic, a time bomb – something like that.’

The Fire Chief stroked his chin with finger and thumb. ‘Could be,’ he said laconically.

Solo shouldered his way back to his car and drove out along the road to the airport. On the first quiet stretch, he pulled into the side under a row of trees and cut the motor. Pulling the tiny transmitter from his breast pocket, he called up the U.N.C.L.E. headquarters in New York.

‘Tell Mr. Waverly,’ he said to the girl on duty, ‘that somebody got there before me, both at St. Mary’s and in Cicero. He’ll know what I mean. And Barbara – tell him I’m not even bothering to go to the third place. I’m going to hang on here while you make a call for me.’

‘You want me to keep the channel open while I call?’

‘Yeah. Call the chief of the Homicide Squad at Wilmington, Delaware. Ask him have they any reports of a homicide at a place called Worsthome Court, on State Street. If they have, it’ll be a client by the name of Spaggia, Enrico Spaggia – an invalid…Got that?’

‘Worsthorne Court…Spaggia…Yes, Mr. Solo. And if there’s no such report?’

‘If there’s not, I’ll be asking him to place a very special guard over that gentleman for his own protection. But some how I don’t think I’ll be troubling him…Oh, and Barbara – while you’re putting through the call, get one of the other girls to call the Chicago police, will you? There’s a murdered man at 1362, Venice Avenue, in Cicero…’

‘You are getting around, aren’t you, Mr. Solo!’ the girl said. ‘Hold on: I’ll give you a report on the Delaware call in a moment.’

Waiting for the girl’s voice to emerge from the diminutive radio, the agent looked at his watch. It was a quarter after ten, and he hadn’t eaten yet. Somehow, though, he felt that soon he would be heading for a restaurant – he couldn’t believe that there would be any need for him to catch a plane for Wilmington…not if the agents of THRUSH were as efficient there as they had been in the Middle West.

‘Mr. Solo?’ – the girl sounded astonished – ‘Ten out of ten for perspicacity! Spaggia and his wife were both shot dead by an unknown assailant using a twelve-bore sporting gun, probably with a sawn-off barrel. The Wilmington police chief is most impressed. If you weren’t so far away, he says, he’d book you for the killings yourself! For the patrolman’s report only came in ten minutes ago and the shooting itself hasn’t taken place more than half an hour. I’m to ask you, Mr. Solo – and I quote – how in hell you knew about it!’

The man from U.N.C.L.E. smiled wearily. ‘Tell him with my compliments,’ he replied, ‘that a little bird told me…’

CHAPTER SIX

SOME ADVICE FROM THE MAN ON THE TOP FLOOR

IT was sunny and warm again on Fifth Avenue. The girl at the Information Desk on the ground floor of the T.C.A. Building had a warm and sunny smile too. It was, Napoleon Solo supposed, what she was paid for. ‘An appointment with The Chairman, Mr. Solo?’ she said sweetly. ‘Of course. I’ll have someone come down and fetch you. Er – it was Mr. *Maximilian* Plant you required, sir?’

‘Certainly. Mr. Maximilian Plant, the Chairman.’

‘Just so, Mr. Solo. We have to ask. Sometimes folk ask for him when all they want really is Mr. Benedict Plant, or Mr. Gaylord, or Mr. Iain.’

‘How shame-making.’

‘Er – yes. Quite.’ The girl spoke softly into the telephonist’s mouthpiece which sprouted like a mad ship’s ventilator from – between her remarkable breasts. In a few minutes the doors of the centre elevator slid open and a raven-haired beauty with equally vital statistics appeared.

‘Mr. Solo?’

‘The same.’

‘If you would be so kind as to follow me, please…’

‘To the ends of the earth,’ the agent said, becoming seized by a kind of madness as the doors closed them in the small cage. ‘Are you the Old Man’s secretary?’

‘The Old…? Mr. *Plant’s* secretary? Good Heavens no!’ The girl was appalled by the idea of so much responsibility. ‘I’m just the Top Floor Hostess. I’m to take you to Miss Finnegan.’

Miss Finnegan was waiting for them on the 62nd and final floor. Her hair was auburn and the bones of her face were lean, rakish and feline. Beneath the cream and navy T.C.A. jacket a special line in voluptuousness – according to the arrowhead creases – lurked.

‘Mr. – er – Solo? If you would follow me, please, I’ll take you through to Mr. Maximilian’s office.’

‘We don’t have time to drop in on Iain, Gaylord or Benedict?’

‘I beg your pardon, Mr. Solo?’

‘Let it pass, let it pass…You wouldn’t be the great man’s secretary, would you? No – of course you wouldn’t—’

‘Miss Bernstein acts as secretary to Mr. Plant.’

Three corridors and two qualities of wall-to-wall carpet later, Solo was in a position to evaluate Miss Bernstein – a nubile brunette with a sulk mouth and a great deal of make up on her long eyelashes. ‘Good grief,’ he exclaimed, ‘do they get you all out of the same mould? Between you, you must keep the House of Maidenform on full production! Do you ever dream you went to T.C.A.?’

The girl – she’d graduated from the uniformed branch and wore a figure-hugging little shift in black – stared at him haughtily. She rose and went to tall, slim double doors at the far end of the office. Opening the two handles together, she pushed the doors apart and announced:

‘Mr. – ah – Solo.’

The man from U.N.C.L.E. walked into a lofty room furnished with two deep leather armchairs and a flat-topped desk covered in telephones and dictagraphs. Behind the desk sat a spectacular blonde of about thirty.

‘Mr. Solo!’ she said, rising and holding out her hand. ‘Welcome to T.C.A. I’m Helga Grossbreitner.’

Solo was getting light-headed. ‘I thought for a moment you were Max Plant,’ he said. ‘Tell me: if Miss – ah – Bernstein is the great man’s secretary, just who are you? If it’s not a rude question, that is.’

Helga Grossbreitner smiled again. She was tall and slimwaisted, with billowy hips and a jutting bosom. She wore blinding white boots, a black-and-white houndstooth skirt, and a black suede waistcoat over her shirt. Her gold hair was drawn back in a loose chignon secured by a velvet bow. ‘Miss

Bernstein is Mr. Plant's general secretary and stenographer,' she said; 'I am his confidential secretary and personal assistant.'

'I can see why they break a guy in gently with all the others, if you're the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow,' Solo said foolishly. 'May a mere mortal inquire what time you take luncheon – if, indeed, you eat at all?'

For the third time, the blonde flashed her smile at him. 'Mr. Plant is waiting for you,' she reminded him.

The inner sanctum from which Maximilian Plant directed the affairs of Transcontinental Airways and associated companies was austere in the starkly luxurious way that only the very rich can afford. Solo sank into one of the vast Swedish hide armchairs and looked at the tubby little man with silver hair who sat on the far side of the teak desk. On top of the desk were a black telephone, a gold pencil and five buff folders.

'One on each of the air crashes, young man,' Plant said in his creaky voice, tapping the nearest file with his forefinger. 'Pages and pages of it… Now – what do you want to know?'

'Mainly, what your experts have found out about them, sir.'

'Just so. Well, to generalise – You do know about the Murchison-Spears complication, I guess? Good – to generalise, we can divide the five disasters into two groups.' He moved two of the folders meticulously to one side. 'The three crashes at Nice fall into one category; the two in the U.S. into another.'

'What's the difference between them?'

'Well, granted that the aim of the operation is to discredit T.C.A. in general and the Murchison-Spears equipment in particular, we find the two categories align neatly with those propositions.'

'Meaning?'

'That the three crashes at Nice, France, were due to some kind of tampering with the Murchison-Spears gear – and that the two accidents in the U.S.A. were due to a – er – less sophisticated kind of sabotage, shall we say?'

'But it *was* sabotage? In fact they were not accidents?'

'Right. The plane which blew up in mid-air was a pressurised 707. It disintegrated at 33,000 feet. My investigators – and the Federal accident people agree with them – believe the ship collapsed when a baggage

compartment porthole was forced open. At that height, of course, a pressurised plane pops like a toy balloon if the higher pressure inside is allowed to get out.'

'You said "forced open"…

'I did. From a painstaking examination of thousands of fragments gathered over half the state, the investigators concluded that the port was forced by some kind of timea-ctuated mechanism – a small hydraulic ram, perhaps, set off by a clockwork alarm. Something of that sort.'

'But surely, Mr. Plant, that suggests an accomplice on the staff of T.C.A.? No outside person would be able to get to a plane for long enough to arrange a device like that, would they?'

'They would not, Mr. Solo. It suggests precisely that.'

'I see. And the other one?'

'The other one implies even greater complicity on the part either of T.C.A. personnel or the airport staff – I genuinely believe it to be the latter…You know what we call a five-five in T.C.A.?'

'A run that's half passengers and half freight?'

'That's it. Well, this flight was a five-five. We had a rush of passengers at the last moment, and the freight compartment was full – up to the maximum permitted load. Up to, but not over, understand…Right. Now the plane's flying with an absolute maximum payload – and the freight includes a number of large, but empty, crates.'

'Empty?'

'Yes. There's a firm that makes shockproof containers – insulated crates and padded boxes for carrying delicate machinery, radar components, nose cones for small rockets, and that sort of thing. Very specialised stuff. Well, we were shipping some of these to an electronics firm in New Jersey – they were going to use them for transporting computer parts or some such, but on our plane they were empty. Are you with me?'

'Yes I am.'

'Right. Now the plane had been loaded and checked – all weights including passengers and baggage calculated and allowed for. But somehow, *after* the check, these empty crates had been removed and others – looking exactly the same but filled with solid ice – had secretly replaced them.'

‘My God! But surely—’

‘Exactly. The unsuspected extra weight was enough to alter the ship’s trim and cause it to stall on take-off…and then of course the ice melted in the fire after the crash, leaving no trace.’

‘Just a minute! If the ice melted and left no trace, how in hell did your investigators—’

‘Aha! A clever piece of deduction, young man! That’s how they found out. Mind you, it *is* deduction only – there’s no proof. But it sure satisfied me.’

‘How did they work it out, then?’

‘Two things, Mr. Solo. Either one of them might not have been conclusive. But the two together…’ Maximilian Plant shrugged eloquently. ‘Among the cargo were several small loads of consumer goods,’ he continued. ‘Stuff for drugstores and wholesale houses, replacements of stock, that kind of jazz. And among these were the two things that tipped our men off – a hundred gross of bottles of indigestion tablets, and a small consignment of barometric lambs…’

The little man placed the palms of both hands on the desk and leaned back with a broad smile, obviously relishing at second hand the deductive triumphs of his employees.

‘I may be dumb, but I’m afraid I don’t quite…’

‘The water, don’t you see, Mr. Solo. The dampness. There were hundreds of broken bottles, thousands of these tablets, and when they tested them – just as a matter of routine, you understand, at first – they discovered that every single one of them had been hydrated; there’s a chemical change when you drop these indigestion tablets in water, and in this case the change had already taken place!’

‘And the – er – barometric lambs, did you say?’

‘You must have seen them. All the souvenir shops stock them. Little plaster models of Bambi covered in some rough substance – when it’s going to rain (that is, when the humidity is high) the lamb turns pink; if it’s going to be fine, the lamb’s blue. And if it’s variable, the thing stays a kind of mauve colour.’

‘And the lambs in the crash were all pink?’

‘As a baby’s bottom! Someone noticed they’d been blue when they were loaded – and the conclusive point was that there was a drought where the plane crashed: hadn’t been a drop of rain for seven weeks!’

‘So neither the pink lambs nor the hydrated tummy tablets could have gotten that way at all unless there had been a lot of water around in the crash itself?’

‘That’s exactly it, Mr. Solo.’

‘It seems a fair deduction from the facts, then. You were saying earlier… about the three crashes at Nice…’

‘Oh, yes. Since these were all at the airport itself, it was possible to get a one hundred per cent tally of the pieces of wreckage – and the boys were thus able to get the most complete picture possible as a basis for their deductions.’

‘A complete picture of the crash, you mean?’

‘Yes. And the minutes leading up to it. Don’t forget we have the black-box wire recordings, which preserve the dialogue between the pilot and control.’

‘Sure.’

‘Well – as you know – in each case they could find nothing, nothing whatever, wrong with anything. And since the controls were working okay, it followed that the mistakes that caused the crashes must have been made by whoever *worked* the controls.’

‘But the controls were in fact being worked by the Murchison-Spears equipment in each case?’

‘That’s it. Therefore the fault lay with the gear – but as you know, the gear was working perfectly, too. *After* the smash.’

‘So what we’re looking for is someone or something that puts the equipment all haywire – yet leaves it okay after a crash?’

‘That’s what they tell me.’

‘Sounds crazy to me. The gear works on signals received from the ground, doesn’t it – like a sort of radar? Then it adjusts the plane’s controls in accordance with this information?…Right. Well, how in hell could anybody tamper with the machine so that it falsified the signals from the ground – and yet, when it was tested after the crash, gave perfectly correct readings?’

‘That,’ Maximilian Plant said with a broad smile, ‘is what I figured *you* were going to find out for us, Mr. Solo!’

Solo grinned back at him. He ran four fingers down one side of his jaw. ‘I don’t know,’ he said, shaking his head; ‘I could understand it if the gear was just bitched up to give wrong readings and therefore fly the plane into the ground – but not when it works okay again *after* the crash!’

‘Yes. It looks as though we are looking for something that causes some kind of *temporary* maladjustment, does it not?’

‘Do you know of any technique that could do this? Do your staff? Can you think of any line of scientific inquiry that would help track down such a device – if one exists?’

Plant smiled again. ‘No,’ he said frankly. ‘None whatever.’

‘Then it looks,’ Solo said, ‘as though I shall have to take a plane to Nice to join my colleague there – for the kind of sabotage your two American planes suffered can be done at any time; but the three jobs at Nice seem dependent on it *being* Nice. So my guess is that if we dig deep enough there, we may just come up with something.’

‘I hope so, young man. This government – and the British government, for that matter – would hate for there to be any more crashes like the others. And we, of course, wish our company to stay solvent!’

‘Naturally, Mr. Plant. Could you give me the names of a few of your key personnel at Nice? I shall want to investigate everything concerning T.C.A. that goes on there, and of course I shall need help to steer me through the technical details when we try to work out what could have happened to these planes.’

‘I can do better than that. I was planning to send my confidential secretary, Miss Grossbreitner, over to Nice to see what went on there. A unit that suffers accidents is usually a unit that has something wrong with it, and I like to keep a finger on the pulse – even if it’s only a distant one. Why don’t you team up with her and she can show you around?…She used to be posted to our maintenance section at Nice airport – that’s why I’m sending her, because she knows the place so well.’

‘It would be a pleasure,’ Solo said – with feeling.

And later, in the cloistered calm of the outer office, he stopped by Helga Grossbreitner’s desk and said: ‘Seems I shall have my opportunity to buy

you that lunch after all! How about tomorrow at the Cield'Azur-on the second floor of the terminal building at Nice airport? It's got four crossed knives and forks in the *Guide Michelin,* so it should be good.'

The girl lifted a hand and arm to tuck a few stray hairs in place beneath the golden curve of her chignon. 'It's kind of you, Mr. Solo,' she said huskily, 'but I'm afraid it would be impossible.'

Solo tried hard to keep his eyes off the taut hemisphere profiled so agreeably by the raised arm. 'I don't see why,' he said.

She looked him full in the eyes and smiled slowly. 'Our own flight arriving at midday is booked solid,' she said. 'I've had to take seats on Air France Flight A.F./022 – and it doesn't arrive there until ten to seven in the evening.'

'Dinner then? We shall be just in time.'

Helga Grossbreitner dropped her arm. She shifted slightly on her haunches. 'Yes,' she said. 'I think I should like that…'

The agent was still grinning to himself out on Fifth Avenue. The Mustang had jolted up on to the wide sidewalk, lined itself up and begun to roar towards him before the scattering of passers-by, the expressions of frozen astonishment and a single girl's scream percolated through into his conscious mind. He looked up to see the high fronted, wide sport car bearing down upon him at what seemed a fantastic speed. His mind, suddenly in top gear, worked like lightning: there was ten yards or more to each side before he could reach the shelter of shop front, parked car, kiosk or tree. A flick of the wrist, a swerve from that high-geared steering, and he wouldn't have a chance.

He took three tremendously quick steps towards the roadway and sprang desperately upwards, his outstretched hands reaching for an ornamental arm projecting from a light standard. As his fingers closed over the green-painted ironwork, he let the impetus of his jump carry his legs on and up, drawing his knees towards his chin like a trapezist.

Missing him by fractions of inches, the Mustang snarled past below with a scream from its highly tuned engine. Fifty yards down the sidewalk, its brake lights blazed momentarily red as it checked, rocked into a left turn with a screech of tyres, and shot through the line of parked cars by a fire-plug. It slewed sideways as it hit the main carriageway, was expertly

corrected, and accelerated away towards the river with a bellow of its twin exhausts.

Solo breathed out. He relaxed his fingers and dropped to the ground, brushing his suit with automatic hand as the lunchtime strollers re-emerged to exclaim and complain.

'…kind of a madman was that, for God's sake?'…'missed this guy here by inches – *inches*, I tell you! – Sure you're okay, bud?'…'and I always said there should be a special licence for guys with…' '…I mean! Cars roaring down the pavement on Fifth *Avenue*…' 'If you hadn't done a Tarzan up there, boy…'

The man from U.N.C.L.E. brushed aside the kindly intentioned inquiries and rushed to the kerb to flag down a cab. The Mustang had jumped the lights at the next inter section and gone. It was a black car with, he thought, a Philadelphia registration – but what the hell! The plates would have been switched within a half hour. And there were plenty of Mustangs around in New York. He had not seen the driver's face, but he had the impression that there were at least two men in the front seat. So…

The cab driver was amused by the long and penetrating scrutiny Solo gave him.

'You lookin' for a long-lost brother, bud?' he asked. 'You give me one good reason to do it – like a legacy from a distant aunt or sump'n – and I'll be your brother all day long.'

'My cousin drives a cab,' Solo told him with a grin. 'We quarrel. He's a republican, you see. So I prefer to – er – avoid…'

'Yeah, yeah, sure. Jump in, mister. Where you wanna go?'

'Just take me over somewhere near the U.N. building, will you?'

'As near as you like, bub. Watch out, though. Everybody's your cousin there! Brothers they got for all the world at that place…'

'I'll bear it in mind.'

'You do that,' the cabby said, slamming the door. 'Too many brothers – that can be a suffocatin' thing…'

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE RAY ON THE HILL-TOP…

‘IT may not be significant, Napoleon,’ Illya was saying, ‘but Sherry and I have been checking various things in the T.C.A. records here – and one thing emerges right away: all three of the crashes took place when the planes approached from the south-west; when the runway was being used in the direction from Cannes towards Nice.’

‘How many runways are there?’

‘Only the one – that’s the point, you see. Most of the airport is on reclaimed land, and the main runway runs parallel with the coast and the motor road…They keep on extending it every year – to take bigger and faster planes, I suppose – but it just spreads further along the coast, never further out to sea. And it can still only be used from southwest to north-east, or from north-east to south-west.’

‘And you say all three crashes took place when it was being used from south-west to north-east?’

‘Yes. It could be only coincidence: they use the runway much more in that direction than in the other. But they do use it the other way sometimes – specially when there’s a *mistral* blowing.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘The *mistral* comes from the west,’ Sheridan Rogers answered. ‘It’s very gusty here when it blows – and it blows like the devil, too! Any plane landing from the south-west would have the *mistral* as a tail wind, so naturally they bring them in the other way. The same goes for take-off, too.’

‘Do they use the same runway for landing and take-off?’

‘Yes, they do.’

‘What d’you deduce from these facts, then?’ Solo asked, turning towards Illya with a smile. ‘Mr. Kuryakin, you have the floor…’

‘Since there is no record of any mishaps when planes land from north-east to south-west, but there were three bad crashes when T.C.A. aircraft came in from the other direction, I go out on a limb and I say…’ Illya paused…‘I say that, since the Murchison-Spears gear proved to be in A1 condition afterwards, then THRUSH – or someone – must be using some kind of device to mess it up only temporarily – and I say further, Napoleon, that this can only be used successfully *if the plane approaches from the west.’*

Solo nodded. ‘So far as the temporary bit is concerned, that’s very much what old man Plant thought,’ he said.’ Any further comments?’

‘Yes. Since the device, whatever it is, appears to be in a sense dependent on direction, one is forced to consider the possibility of some beam or ray.’

‘Yeah. That’s what I figured…You mean something actually *sited* on the west side of the airport, so it can only be used if the ships come in from that side?’

‘Exactly – and this implies it must be fairly short-range, too. I should be inclined to suggest something aimed or beamed straight at the plane as it glides in towards the run way over the sea…probably from one of the many hilltop villages just behind the coastal strip.’

‘Or from a boat, maybe?’

Kuryakin shook his head. ‘We checked that. It would have to be moored or anchored, and there’s no record of any such ship – besides, the fishermen from Cagnes, the water ski schools, the speedboat owners would all notice it: it’s a very busy piece of ocean, just there!’

‘Okay, no boat. So what about your hilltop villages…?’

‘Well, there’s Mougins, Biot, Vallauris, La Colle, St.-Paulde-Vence, Gattieres, Haut-de-Cagnes – all of them look down on the flight path from the hills dotting the country between the mountains and the sea. You can stand on the ramparts and look down and see the planes silver against the blue sea as they glide in.’

‘Very poetic…but where do we start looking?’

The Russian smiled, spreading his arms in a gesture of indecision. ‘It seems to me,’ he said, pushing the tow-coloured hair out of his eyes, ‘that there’s only one possible lead for us to take.’

‘And that is?’

‘To follow up every conceivable angle on the *social* life of T.C.A. staff based here in Nice. Watch and listen; get to know them; find out how they – how do you say? – tick…Because members of THRUSH must have infiltrated the organization somewhere, and if we can get on to them—’

‘You mean once we locate which of the personnel belong to THRUSH, we can tail them and at least get a start geographically?’

‘Exactly. It would provide a starting point. After all, we cannot very well knock on every door between here and Cannes and ask: “Excuse me, do you happen to have a secret ray in the parlour?”, can we!’

They were sitting over coffee and brandy on the terrace of a waterfront restaurant at Villefranche. Helga Grossbreitner still retained an apartment somewhere near Nice and she had gone to check that everything was in order there. The other three had decided to hold their council of war in as agreeable a locale as possible. Violet sea water lapped at the piles of the balcony on which they sat and fragmented the reflections from the windows of the customs house on the far side of the harbour. Out in the bay, someone was having a party on one of the big steam yachts. The sound of laughter and music drifted across to mingle with the footsteps and voices of the holidaymakers thronging the hard. Farther out, two American cruisers dressed overall added their complement of light to the garland of lamps outlining the whole inlet from Villefranche to Cap Ferrat. Above, the headlamps of cars traversing the Basse Corniche, the Moyenne Corniche and the Grande Corniche threaded their way between the brightly illuminated villas rising tier upon tier into the velvet sky. A breath of warm air stirred the purple bougainvillea draping the balustrade by their table.

‘I entirely agree with your suggestion, Illya,’ Solo said as he called for the bill. ‘As it happens it works in well with an arrangement I’ve already made. I thought we ought to have a look at the murdered stewardess’s apartment – not the one she was sharing with you, my dear; her own place by the Avenue Malaussena – just in case. Miss Grossbreitner has arranged to get the key from T.C.A., and she’s meeting me there tomorrow morning. I’d be most grateful if you could join us, Miss Rogers.’

Still profoundly shocked by the killing of her friend, Sherry nodded a pale face. ‘Naturally, if there’s anything I can do…’

‘Bless you. I don’t for a moment imagine we shall find anything significant. But your help will be invaluable in case we do.’

A few minutes later Solo said good night and took a cab back to the airport, where he had a rendezvous with T.C.A.’s Technical Director for France. They were to go over the mechanics of the Murchison-Spears equipment – with which Illya was already familiar – and the various safety devices incorporated in the airline’s Tridents. Kuryakin and the girl drove out to Eze village, wandered for a few minutes among the steep stone staircases which served as streets between the old houses perched 1,300 feet above the sea, and drove back to Nice along the Moyenne Corniche.

For a long time the girl was silent. Then at last she turned in her seat. ‘Illya,’ she said, ‘do you honestly think you and your friend will be able to clear up all this…this *mess?’*

‘What – the way the crashes were engineered, you mean?’

‘Everything…Deliberate sabotage, murders, innocent people dying because a plane crash is to some share manipulator’s advantage…it’s horrible. And then those poor people slaughtered in America…and someone trying to run your friend down in a car…It makes me feel sick.’

‘It is not a pretty business, I am afraid.’

‘And what’s *your* business, Illya? I know you and your friend are some kind of investigators – are you G-men or members of the – what is it? – the C.I.A.?’

‘Those are United States bodies, Sherry. We work for something like that – but it is an *inter*national organization.’

‘You mean the U.N.?’

‘Well – something like that. Let’s leave it there…As to whether we can succeed in clearing up the problem, in stopping the crashes and the other deaths: I think we can. Provided T.C.A. itself has not become a THRUSH Satrap, that is…’

‘Illya – you have mentioned that word several times: THRUSH. Just what or who is THRUSH?…And what, for Pete’s sake, is a Satrap?’

The Russian pulled the Peugeot into the side of the wide road. They had just turned a comer and now the lights of Nice lay spread out below them-a

measureless tide of bright pinpoints surging against the dark bulk of the hills, heaving itself into groups and clusters and twinkling constellations, spreading almost as far as the eye could see in a coruscating flood.

'Oh,' the girl breathed, 'isn't it *beautiful?* I never tire of seeing Nice from this viewpoint.'

'It *is* one of the classic sights,' Illya agreed. He turned and took the girl's two hands in his own. 'You ask me what is THRUSH,' he said. 'It is difficult to answer you truthfully – for who knows what THRUSH is? It is an organization, a way of existence, a dedication to evil…it is almost a nation, although you will not find its name on any maps. And yet, again, if you looked at a globe, there would hardly be a country you could touch which was not in some way or another under its influence.'

'But who runs this – organization?' Sherry asked practically.

'It is directed by a Council – a collection of industrialists, scientists and intellectuals who see themselves as superbeings whose mission is to rule over others. Each of them is a tremendously powerful individual in his own right in the ordinary world; each has an important cover position – but all of them owe their allegiance only to THRUSH.'

'It sound tremendously sinister. What does THRUSH *do*, though?'

'Under the direction of the Council it infiltrates, seduces, corrupts, perverts, dominates and finally takes over…anything. An industrial organization, a chain of stores, a college, a manufacturing complex, a radio station, an army even. And, once taken over, the system dominated continues to all intents and purposes to function as before – outwardly. Only now its whole purpose is to serve the aims of THRUSH…And these concealed outposts, as it were, of the supranation called THRUSH are termed Satraps.'

'But how does the organization take over these…things, places, people?'

'As I said – infiltration of key personnel, bribery, blackmail, murder, manoeuvering the markets (that's what they are trying to do with T.C.A., you see). You name it, they'll do it. Nothing is too rough for them.'

'You said the – Satraps? – the Satraps outwardly carried on "business as usual", but that really they only served the aims of THRUSH?'

'I did.'

'Well – what are the aims of THRUSH, Illya ?'

‘THRUSH has a single purpose, Sherry. It’s not for hire. It may appear at times to favour one nation as against another – but strictly for its own reasons. However limited a THRUSH objective may appear to be, however much it may seem to be an operation for financial reward, say – you may depend on it that in some way that operation advances the Cause.’

‘And that is?’

Kuryakin sighed. ‘THRUSH’s purpose,’ he said, ‘is to dominate the earth…’

‘And you and your friend – your organization, that is – try to stop them? You ferret out the Satraps wherever you find them and…destroy them?’

The Russian turned the ignition key and started the motor. He gestured at the panorama beyond the windscreen. Below the road the glittering sea-front instigated a chain reaction of street lighting that stretched in a brilliant and dwindling necklace the whole twenty kilometres round the bay to Cap d’Antibes. ‘Look at the lights,’ he said soberly.

‘Who knows how many hundreds of thousands of people are taking their pleasures, innocent and not so innocent, behind those lights…and behind other lamps just like them all over the world?

‘There are people – let us say – who are trying to put those lights out. We are trying our best to keep them blazing…’

CHAPTER EIGHT

A MISSED APPOINTMENT – ANOTHER SURPRISE

ANDREA BERGEN'S apartment was in a small new block not far from the main railway station in Nice. Illya parked the hired 404 on the pavement between two of the plane trees which shaded the quiet avenue and went upstairs with Solo. The place was on the third floor – a large studio room with kitchen and bathroom. It was at the back of the building, the least expensive position, they guessed, facing the rear of a supermarket across a marshalling yard full of trucks carrying imported Italian cars. The police had been quite cooperative about letting them have the keys – though dubious about the chances of their finding anything.

'I must emphasize,' Solo had said to the superintendent, 'that we are not in any way attempting to go over your own ground a second time; nor, indeed, to cast any reflections on the efficient work of your department – professionally speaking, we are not interested in the murder.'

'Thank you, Monsieur Solo. It is a crime we appear far short of solving, however. Nobody has come forward – and nobody recollects having seen the short, dark man you described as being near the murdered lady.'

'I didn't think they would. It was only a long shot – and anyway the man may be perfectly innocent: my colleague seeing him twice that afternoon may be entirely a coincidence.'

'I should doubt that, Monsieur. To professionals such as yourself, the man intent upon doing wrong appears almost to cast an aura, so that his presence and intentions virtually declare themselves. I have every faith in your – what do you say? – eighth sense.'

'You flatter us, Monsieur: it is only the sixth sense!'

‘Ah. Perhaps justly, my countrymen are celebrated for their courtesy, Monsieur Solo.... However, to return to our muttons, as you Americans say – you will hope, then, to discover some things bearing on the airplane crash in which Mademoiselle Bergen was injured?’

‘I very much doubt it – but I feel we have to try.’

‘You will find, I am afraid, no diaries with carefully reasoned *résumés* of Mademoiselle Bergen’s recollections of the incident – for she came here only for a half hour, having been discharged from hospital, before leaving to share an apartment with a friend.’

‘Miss Rogers. Yes, we do know that. In fact Miss Rogers is to meet us at the residence of Miss Bergen to see if she can remember anything the murdered girl said in that half hour – or whether the place reminds her of anything that may be of interest or of use in our inquiry.’

‘So. Well, I wish you luck, gentlemen, in your quest with the charming Mademoiselle Rogers…’

But the charming Mademoiselle Rogers seemed singularly reluctant to keep her appointment. ‘*What* time did Sherry tell you she’d be here?’ Solo asked Illya when they had been examining the place for twenty-five minutes – and had found nothing.

‘Ten o’clock. The time we arranged to get here.’

‘Well, that’s very odd. We weren’t late, so she couldn’t have come and gone. When did you last see her, Illya ?’

‘Last night, of course. We went for a little drive after you left. We had a look at Eze village. And then I drove her home.’

‘Where did you leave her?’

‘Outside her flat, of course,’ the Russian said, colouring slightly. ‘In the Rue Massena.’

‘All right, all right,’ Solo said, smiling. ‘Don’t get all slavic on me. I just thought if you *had* happened to stay for breakfast, it would—’

‘There was nothing like that at all,’ Illya said stiffly – adding, with a (for him) rare flash of sarcasm: ‘You forget, Napoleon; I am not the *chief* enforcement officer!’

‘*Touché!’* The woman’s voice drawled sleepily from the door as Solo burst into laughter. Helga Grossbreitner was standing there, leaning against

the doorpost. She was wearing a white linen suit with a huge-brimmed hat in lacy black straw – and she looked cool, and infinitely attractive.

‘Sorry I’m a few minutes late,’ she added, ‘but I came on in as the door was open…to hear my virtue – at least by implication – being impugned!’

‘Come on in,’ Solo grinned. ‘Don’t mind my friend: he’s just a little jealous.’

‘Good morning, Helga,’ Illya said. ‘Do forgive me. Really, I did not in any way mean—’

‘Oh, for Heaven’s sake!’ the girl interrupted. ‘Don’t give it a thought; we’re all grown up here. If I don’t mind the night-porter at a man’s hotel seeing me come in without luggage at one a.m., why should I object to good-humoured remarks from his friend?’ She paused and looked across at Solo speculatively, adding in her throatiest voice: ‘When are you going to ask me to dinner again, Solo?’

‘Tonight.’ the agent replied promptly. ‘We’re agreed that we should follow up the social life of your employees, and there’s a party of them going up to Haut-de-Cagnes. I think we could do worse than tag along. We’ll make up a foursome…you do know Sherry Rogers?’

‘But of course. Very well. She was already on the staff at the airport when I was working here.’

‘Good. Which brings me to another point – the one we had been discussing when you came in: Sherry was due here at ten o’clock and now it’s twenty-five to eleven. You haven’t seen her?’

‘I’m afraid not. I shouldn’t worry though. She works in Liaison now, doesn’t she? There may easily have been some panic at the *aéroport.*’

‘I suppose so. There must be plenty of alarms and excursions in your game, apart from crashes – late arrivals, re routings, diversions and so on…’

‘You’re telling me!’ the girl said. ‘Can I help in any way?’

‘You can try, if you would. All we wanted to ask Sherry was to keep an eye open for anything in this apartment that she thought might throw a light – however faint – on the crash Andrea Bergen was injured in.’

‘But of course. Have you found anything at all yet?’

Solo and Illya admitted that they hadn’t. Nor, despite the able and willing assistance of Helga, were they able to discover a single thing out of

the ordinary in the flat. Clothes, cosmetics and shoes were all neatly in place; the small kitchen carried a collection of tinned goods in a refrigerator, as befitted the home of a girl whose business took her away several days a week; household bills and bank statements were neatly docketed in a bureau; a bundle of unexceptional letters from a Second Officer in Swissair lived under the sachets in the handkerchief drawer. By twelve thirty, they had to confess that the apartment would yield nothing.

'I shall leave you, then,' Helga said, approaching close to Solo and picking a small piece of thread from his lapel with a gloved hand. 'Tonight we meet at what time?'

'Let's say seven thirty, okay?'

'Fine,' Illya said. 'Unless something's happened that makes it too early for Sherry. I'll have to check her apartment and the T.C.A. office to find out what's happened. I can't think what's become of her…'

But the apartment in the Rue Massena was empty and the T.C.A. bureau at the airport had heard nothing from Sheridan Rogers since she went off duty at six thirty p.m. the previous day.

'She's not due on again until tomorrow morning at eight,' the pretty, plump girl Illya had spoken to when first he came to the airport volunteered. 'I shouldn't worry if I were you. She may have gone off for the day, you know.'

'She *may*, certainly,' Illya said to Solo afterwards. 'And admittedly I do not know her well – but such behaviour would seem unlike what I have come to expect from her, you know. She definitely said she would see me at Bergen's place today.'

'Well, we'll see what happens when it's time for her to show for her next duty,' Solo said reasonably. 'If she's not here then, you can really start to worry…in the meantime, let's just clue ourselves up once more on these automatic landing equipment systems, eh ?'

T.C.A.'s Technical Director for France saw them in his office – a small room overlooking the apron from one of the long, low buildings enclosing the company's maintenance unit at Nice. He was a slight man, with smooth, dark hair and a clipped moustache, beneath which a long-stemmed pipe with a silver mouthpiece projected. For the whole time they were there, the pipe never left his mouth: it seemed immovably jammed between his teeth, hardly moving except to wag up and down when the exigencies of the

language required these to shift their position. Unlike Waverly, however, the owner of this pipe was an active smoker – obscured for much of the time that he spoke by dense clouds of tobacco fumes and surrounded by small ashtrays on which the piles of burned matches gradually mounted.

‘Well, chaps,’ he began, ‘you both know the general drift now. What’s the programme for today? Want me to fill you in on the M-S gen ?’

‘Yes – if you *could* recap briefly, that would be a help,’ Solo said. ‘Then perhaps a few words on the implications *vis-à-vis* the crashes.’

‘Willco,’ the Technical Director said. He knocked out the pipe, refilled it, sucked noisily at the mouthpiece and applied a match to the bowl. ‘Well, I daresay you know the R.A.E. at Bedford – the Royal Aircraft Establishment, you know – began experimenting with automatic landings soon after the war,’ he continued. ‘In ’fifty-five, the Blind Landing Unit had worked out a system for the V-bombers of the R.A.F…that’s—’

‘Okay, okay, the Royal Air Force,’ Solo interrupted with a smile. ‘We do know that one.’

‘Roger and out!…Sorry, chaps. As I say, they worked out a system for the V-bombers, which of course had to be able to fly in any weather. And the bombers duly used it. But unfortunately it wasn’t good enough for the civil airlines.’

‘Good grief, why not?’

‘Margins of error, old boy. The RAF’s prepared to accept a very small calculated risk – any operational war force must be, obviously. The particular figure determining things in this case was one fatality in one hundred thousand landings where the system was in full use.’

‘And this very small percentage of calculated error was not good enough for civil planes?’ Illya asked.

‘Not by a long chalk. The Air Registration Board wouldn’t certify full use of any equipment until it had proved a safety standard of one fatality per ten *million* landings…Nevertheless B.E.A. started using Smith’s equipment on their Tridents in 1964. This controlled the aircraft’s height until the moment of touchdown. Then B.O.A.C. equipped V.C.-10’s with similar gear developed by Elliott-Bendix.’

‘Was this used on all landings?’

‘No. Mainly for fog. A limited use in fact. They were waiting for the International Civil Aviation Organization to give the final go-ahead on world-wide adoption of the system in principle.’

‘And the principle is?’

‘Planes carry the equipment in a square box housed in the cockpit. As they approach the airport, the box fixes them on a localizer beam which brings them in line with the runway to be used for the landing. Then another ground transmitter broadcasts an electronic beam down which the plane rides, as it were, to establish the correct glide path.’

‘And the gear in the box causes the plane’s controls to adjust themselves so as to maintain the correct altitude and inclination for touchdown?’

‘Dead on target, old chap. Hole in one. The pilot still has to control the sideways aspect, the roll of his wings, himself but the height’s the most difficult part of it, after all. And even in good weather this limited use of the stuff increases the safety factor no end.’

‘Aren’t they developing an – er – extension to the system so that the roll factor will be taken care of too?’

‘They are. Have, in fact. Supposed to be installed later this year. In the meantime, our own gear – the Murchison-Spears, you know – already takes care of this.’

‘Is it based on the same principles?’ Illya asked.

The Technical Director struck a match and sucked the flame noisily into the sodden bowl of his pipe. ‘Partly,’ he replied. ‘Fact is, the gear that fixes the plane on the localizer beam is a dead crib – so far as that’s possible within the copyright infringement laws. But the part that adjusts the height and inclination is quite different. Instead of relying on a ground-to-air electronic beam and riding down it, the Murchison-Spears equipment works on a system more like ordinary radar.’

‘You mean it emits a signal and deduces information from the way that signal is echoed back – then causes the aircraft to act upon this?’

‘Broadly speaking, yes. Murchison designed the altitudeand-aspect end of it – that’s simple in theory but extremely sophisticated in design. And Spears – he’s the hydraulics wizard – handled the part that deals with the roll factor. Basically, this is just a sensitizer at each wingtip and some thing very like the old fashioned balance-pipe between them. But again – the

means he used to achieve this are electronically most advanced. The sensitizers – which both transmit and receive pulses, after all – are extraordinarily compact and ingenious.'

'How do you yourself account for the three T.C.A. crashes here?'

The man with the pipe lit another match. For some moments he puffed away behind his private smokescreen, then he rose to his feet and crossed the room to the window. 'Very difficult question to answer,' he said at last, with his back to them. 'Mind, I haven't had time to go over the bits – the actual pieces of the wreckage of the latest one. They're being assembled on the floor in a hangar nearby, as nearly as possible in their original relationship to each other. And that's a hell of a job when you've got perhaps several tens of thousands of fragments – buckled, torn, melted, twisted, distorted and what-not!

'I can imagine.'

'Nevertheless, my chaps and I have formed certain opinions – and they *are* only opinions, based on interpretation of the information supplied by other bods, and not deductions from data observed by ourselves. That'll come later.'

'Any opinion, any suggestion, any hint will be valuable, sir.'

'Yes. Well – for what it's worth, all my chaps underwrite what the accident investigation johnnies said: that there was no human error in any of the three prangs. And that there was nothing wrong with any of the planes. Or with their normal controls, for that matter.'

'You're saying, in effect, that there was something wrong with the Murchison-Spears equipment?'

'No, old boy. That's exactly what I'm *not* saying. I'm saying there was *nothing* wrong with anything *else*. You can draw what deductions you want to from that. In view of the fact that the M-S gear was proved to be in perfect condition after each crash, I simply cannot say that, ergo. it must have been the gear that was at fault. Until our own investigations have been completed I must say nothing: my mind must remain open…'

'If the gear *had* been at fault, what would you say – unofficially, of course – would have been the – er – likeliest thing to have happened to it? That could have left it in perfect condition afterwards, that is.'

‘Seems obvious to me, old chap. In such a case – *if* one existed! – one would have to look for a set of conditions causing false readings on the equipment. Something that caused the box to direct the aircraft as though the ground *wasn’t* where it really was…if you get my meaning!’

‘You mean the box could have acted as though the runway was higher or lower than it really is, for example?’

‘I mean,’ the Director said carefully, ‘I’d be inclined to look for a situation in which such a thing *could* happen.’

‘And if such a set of conditions existed – which part of the gear would you – er – be inclined to suspect of being affected?’

‘Look – the box divides itself pretty definitely into three separate complexes, doesn’t it? The bit getting it in line with the runway to start with…and after that the altitude-and-aspect gear, and finally the wingtip equipment that controls the roll. Right?’

‘We’re with you.’

‘Right. Now it would seem unlikely that the first is in any way affected: all three crashes actually occurred on the runway, so the planes must have been accurately lined up, eh?…And again, no eyewitnesses have mentioned anything like a sideslip or a wingtip digging in or anything of that sort. Admittedly the last one did cartwheel – but that was apparently only after the undercarriage had been wrecked on the first impact. So it seems – shall we say? – *unlikely* that the wingtip gubbins *caused* the crashes.’

‘Which leaves the altitude and glide-angle equipment?’

‘Exactly. You examine all the witnesses’ statements. Seventy per cent of ’em say something like “the plane seemed to fly straight into the ground”. And the survivor to this last one was trying to say something to the nurse in the ambulance. Unfortunately, she didn’t speak English – but we gather he was spouting something about height, or too high, or something. All of which seems to me to suggest either wrong altimeter readings or wrong glide angles.’

‘Or wrong interpretation by the gear to give the *effect* of this?’

The dark man with the moustache shrugged. For the first time, he removed the pipe from his mouth. ‘You must appreciate my position,’ he said, jetting a small cloud of smoke into the air. ‘We make the gear, after all. As there’s no evidence of faultiness after the crash, we feel it’s not up to us

to ferret out reasons why it *might have been* at fault – though of course we should accept any conclusive evidence found by someone else.'

'I understand,' Solo said. 'And you can't think of any device – or set of conditions, to use your phrase – under which the part of the gear affecting height readings or glide angle could be momentarily distorted, and yet return to normal afterwards?'

The Technical Director jammed the pipe back into his mouth. 'Oh, have a heart, old chap,' he said. 'Have a heart!'

Later, Solo and Illya spent some time studying the technical drawings of the Murchison-Spears equipment – with particular emphasis on those parts of it affecting the height of the aircraft and the automatic control of this.

'I can see the principle,' Solo said. 'But I'm afraid the details are a bit too…'

'No, no, Napoleon,' Illya. said. 'It is relatively simple. Look…after the scanner tube has…Look! Here…This is where, if it was just giving a reading, the electronic pulse would be turned into a visual indication, on a dial. See?'

'Ye-e-es. I'm with you so far. Just.'

'Well, since it's not *just* giving a reading – but causing the plane to react as a pilot would after digesting that reading – the electronic information feeds in…here. In this small memory storage unit…'

'Something like a tiny computer?'

'On a far less complicated scale, yes…And then these selectors…here… and here…and here…See, the contact is made by this core of Toridium. As you know, it's a metal whose coefficient of expansion is—'

'No, Illya, no!' Solo said firmly. 'This is way beyond me. Let me leave the technical stuff to you. When you have an idea, tell me – and we'll act on it. Until then, you're on your own, boy!'

'Just as you like, Napoleon. I think I have the glimmering of an idea how someone might – just might – begin to make…what did the man say?'

'A set of conditions?'

'That's it! A set of conditions! A set of conditions in which this equipment might be made to react falsely without permanently damaging it…but I'd like to brood on it before I commit myself.'

‘You do that. In the meantime, we’ll start on the social side, as we said…’

At seven thirty, they met Helga for a drink in the airport lounge. Sheridan Rogers had still not returned to her apartment, nor had she left any message at the T.C.A. office or in the bureau in the terminal building. They gave her a half hour and left at eight o’clock – calling once again at the empty flat on the way to Haut-de-Cagnes.

Illya, customarily a reserved companion, was abnormally quiet and worried during the short journey. Solo and Helga, torn between the extremes of failing to cheer him up and appearing too flippant in the face of his obvious distress, struck a kind of subdued bantering note in their exchanges as the car sped along the motor road to Cros-de-Cagnes and then turned inland towards the mediaeval village perched so picturesquely above it. From the coast, ‘Haut-de-Cagnes presents a symmetrical aspect – a pyramid of rough, redtiled Provençal roofs crowned by a 14th century Grimaldi castle, beneath whose floodlit and crenellated keep the place clusters at night. But the visitor who ventures along either of the valleys running inland to each side of it soon sees the village in a different perspective. It is built – for a start – at the end of a spur and not on a hillock…so that a moving viewpoint presents constantly shifting profiles. At one moment, the emphasis seems to be rectangular – a line of picture-postcard houses serrating the sky at the top of a squared-up bluff; the next minute, the picture is all zig-zags – a series of slopes linked by hairpin bends, the whole complex rising to stone ramparts and punctuated by clusters of cottages clinging to the wall as tenaciously as the bougainvillea which covers them. And yet on the far side of the valley, a little higher up, an onlooker would characterize the place as a series of stepped terraces, rectangular plots and parcels of land related vertically by the swooping walls of villas and the trailing profusion of flowers hanging from their balustrades…

Illya drove about a kilometre along the road leading inland to Vence and then made a steep, climbing turn back to the right, approaching the old village from the north.

The centre of social life in Haut-de-Cagnes is the *place* at the very summit of the pyramid – a small square dominated by the battlemented turret of the keep. Here a handful of expensive and chi-chi boutiques and

souvenir shops vie with the three cabaret-restaurants in the laudable task of parting the tourist painlessly and as elegantly as possible from his money. And here in the summer – especially in August – an absurd and ludicrous number of cars attempt to park.

As the 404 negotiated the narrow, steep streets leading by degrees to the *place*, it became increasingly necessary to stop and allow other vehicles room for manoeuvre – despite the traffic lights which in a desultory way tried to regulate the traffic coming up and down. As always, the square was full, and people on their way to the boutiques or the cafés had left their cars absolutely anywhere: they lined the constricted roadway, projected across intersections, blocked the exits from drives and garages, baulked those wishing to turn and sprawled across every available inch of space in the congested village. Illya was eventually forced to turn around at the top and drive down again to a square only half way up the ramparts. After waiting a moment here, they slid into a space vacated by a departing Belgian and climbed back to the *place* at the top via a steep stone staircase.

The party from T.C.A. – there were really three separate parties – was easy enough to identify. The alert young men and women in their crisp uniforms had taken over the three outside tables on one of the café terraces.

Helga, Illya and Solo took a table nearby and watched them curiously for a while. But the stereotyped banter, the stereotyped horse-play and the expected ploys soon palled and they began to look around at the other tourists there. Next door to their restaurant was another, and those sitting outside under the floodlit vine pergolas were separated from them only by a row of white fencing running from the junction of the two buildings. It was very warm in the soft summer darkness – a little humid, perhaps – and the shrill banalities of the holidaymakers sounded loud on the night air. On the far side of the square, beyond the massed high lights of the parked cars, away from the milling convolutions of the café patrons, blue-clad men with lined faces the colour of walnuts played a quiet game of *pétanque*.

After a while, someone came out on to the terrace with an accordion and sang. They drank a bottle of cold, aromatic Alsatian white wine and ordered another. A second cabaret turn drifted among the closely packed tables playing a guitar and singing American folk songs. In the distance, they could hear the first singer and her accordion entertaining customers in the basement of the next-door café.

Motor-car engines started up, revved and whined away in low gear. New arrivals laboured up the hill seeking a place to park. Every now and then a burst of applause or a concerted shout of laughter testified to the success of the evening.

After the second cabaret act, waiters at the place beyond the white fen pushed together three tables and started laying out glasses and napkins. Several parties had left. Obviously a larger one was expected. Soon a dozen or more people were threading their way among the other clients to reach the long table. All of them, Solo saw when they were installed, were women – and the majority of them were in trousers. Several were very heavy about the haunches, with severe, mannish shirts and lined faces wearing a determined look. Others were willowy and slim, with voluptuous bodies below cropped hair. One red-haired girl with shining eyes wore a low-cut bronze cocktail dress. She was very beautiful.

Some of them drank *pastis* but the majority nursed wide, heavy glasses carrying whisky and ice. They were very gay and giggled a lot, the small conversational clumps every now and then coalescing into one big group when someone related an item sufficiently salacious, funny or astonishing to engage their attention.

The red-haired girl appeared to be the *enfant terrible* of the party and at the same time a kind of butt. Almost everything she said was greeted with whoops of laughter or exclamations of feigned outrage. After one low-voiced confidence entrusted to her immediate neighbours had resulted in a shriek of mock dismay, a broad-beamed woman at the far end of the table called out: ‘If Macnamara’s going to drag us all down to her level *again,* at least let her for God’s sake speak up so we can all *hear!*’

‘Oh, but she isn’t,’ the red-head’s neighbours assured the woman, forcibly preventing the girl from rising to her feet and declaiming. ‘We’re having no more of Macnamara!’

‘Darling, but I insist…’

‘No, Kay. No,’ they chorused, laughing. ‘Macnamara’s banned!’

And then they all started to sing at once: ‘Tara ra-raaaa, Ta-rat-taraaaa Raaaaa…

They had been there about twenty minutes when Solo suddenly realized that Sheridan Rogers was among them. She had her back to them and he hoped that Illya would not notice her – for in fact she looked rather drunk,

with smudged make-up, a blotchy face and hair over one eye. But unfortunately the Russian chanced to look up then, saw the intensity of his regard, and – following his eye – also noticed the girl.

‘Sherry!’ he exclaimed with a great deal of warmth. ‘What happened to you? We’ve been wondering all day. How nice to see you…’ He rose to his feet and crossed to the fencing, leaning over to address the missing date from behind her shoulder. The girl called Macnamara bent her head and whispered something, causing Sherry Rogers to giggle and glance slyly over her shoulder at the Russian. ‘Hi, comrade!’ she said thickly. ‘How goes the investi – investiga – How goes the spy-hunt, eh? Found any more enemy agents under your bed?’ She rose clumsily to her feet and faced him.

One of the girls in trousers murmured something behind her hand and the whole table burst out laughing again.

‘That’s ri’,’ Sherry giggled. ‘I don’t ’spect he has!…But what are you doin’ *here,* lover-boy? Have you come to learn yourself a bit of ’xperience? Or are you still after the bold, bad villains for Uncle Sam?’

Illya had fallen back a pace in bewilderment. ‘Sherry!’ he began; ‘what happened? I thought we had a date…?’

The girl laughed raucously. ‘That’s a good one,’ she cried. ‘A date with a dream! My li’l Russian Lull’by…What makes you think I stick aroun’ for spy-catchers, comrade?’

‘But, Sherry—’

‘Oh, wrap it up…You make me tired. You think I’ve nothing better to do —’ The girl’s voice died away. Swaying slightly, she stared across the low fence at him for a moment, then lurched a step to one side and sat down abruptly in her chair. ‘I want a drink,’ she complained.

In the silence which had fallen over the long table the voice of one of the beefy, butch girls rang out finishing a sentence: ‘…at his *hair,* darling! It could be one of us in drag…’ A dozen pairs of eyes, bright with maliciousness and amusement, stared at the Russian as he stood flushed and dumbfounded among the red linen tablecloths. Then Helga left her seat and walked over to him. ‘Let’s go, Illya,’ she said softly, touching his arm. ‘I’m afraid you’ll do no good staying here. I’m terribly sorry but there’s no doubt about it…the girl’s plastered!’

Kuryakin was very quiet as Solo drove them back toward Nice. Once or twice he shook his bead as though in disbelief. At length Solo glanced into

the driving mirror, raised his eyebrows at the reflection of the Russian's glum expression which he saw there, and said seriously:

'Look, Illya – I was as astonished as you were. The girl's behaviour doesn't seem to stack up. But we all saw it; we all heard. And I'm sorry – believe me, I'm real sorry…I guess anyone can make a mistake over somebody. In the meantime, I don't want to come the heavy, but we do have a job to do. We went out to keep an eye on the social life of T.C.A.'s people out here. The ones we went to watch seemed innocent enough – but don't forget Sheridan Rogers is a T.C.A. employee too.'

The Russian sighed heavily. 'Thank you, Napoleon,' he said. 'You are quite right, of course. And anyway I have long ago trained myself never to be surprised by what human beings do…at least not after the first shock. It was the…implications that were bothering me here.'

Solo nodded. 'I know,' he said, pulling the car into the side of the road to allow an ambulance to hiss past, the blue light on its roof winking and the urgent two-tone siren blaring. 'It does rather suggest a new dimension, doesn't it?'

Helga said good night and left them at St. Laurent du Var, half-way between Cagnes and the airport. She refused Solo's offer of a late meal in Nice on the grounds that she had to get back to her own apartment and see to various things. 'Where do you have to get to, Helga?' he asked.

'St. Paul-de-Vence. It's not far – and, look, there's a taxi rank on the other side of the road. That's why I asked you to stop here.'

'But Helga – we were half-way there at Haut-de-Cagnes! Why didn't you let me take you there? Let me turn round and take you now…'

The wide mouth gleamed in a smile. 'My dear,' she said softly, leaning in at the window and laying a hand on his arm, 'I wouldn't dream of it. You two boys get back to your hotel. I'll see you tomorrow. Promise…'

Before they reached the entrance to the airport another ambulance passed them, followed a moment later by two more together.

'They're in a hurry!' Illya commented. 'There must be a big pile-up on the Promenade des Anglais or something.'

But he was wrong. The ambulances turned right at the airport. Beyond the spiky palms and the low, rectangular, blue-lit bulk of the terminal building, a crimson glare pulsed in the night sky. Across the dark field

vehicles and people on foot swarmed towards an incandescent tangle of wreckage on the main runway.

And above them, piercing the clouds of smoke, rose a shattered tailplane bearing the three-letter monogram of Transcontinental Airways.

CHAPTER NINE

THE SILENT WITNESS

IN the confusion, among the frantic comings and goings of firemen, nurses, policemen, airport officials, gendarmerie and salvage corps, it was almost impossible to find out what had happened. In the excess of zeal which always affects officialdom on the occasion of disaster, the airport police were moving people on so fast that Solo wasn't even able to explain who they were. Eventually, they had to leave the Peugeot in one of the public car parks some distance away from the buildings and make their way out on to the apron by dodging the patrols.

It seemed – from what they were able to glean – that T.C.A.'s evening flight from Paris had crashed on arrival; that the aircraft had hit the ground and burst into flames with the loss of many lives; and that the accident had happened ten minutes or a quarter of an hour before they had arrived – probably while they were driving down from Haut-de-Cagnes, which would explain why they had not heard the impact or the explosion.

Ultimately, it was the Technical Director who supplied the details. He was hurrying back to the T.C.A. block from the scene of the crash when he saw them and paused.

'Hullo, you chaps!' he called, actually taking his pipe from his mouth as he spoke. 'What about this, eh? Carbon copy. Absolute carbon copy of the others, you know…This time I happened to be out on the terrace, watching the crate come in – and he flew straight into the ground again. No doubt about it. He flew it right down on to the deck.' He shook his head uncomprehendingly.

'And everything was working perfectly, of course?' Solo asked.

‘Well, we can’t say until we’ve examined the pieces, can we? But judging from the dialogue between the captain and the bods up there’ – he jerked his thumb towards the green windows of the control tower behind them – ‘everything *seemed* to be. Looks as though it’s what you chaps call a dead ringer, what?’

‘Survivors?’ Illya queried.

The Director held up a single finger. ‘Only one. Again,’ he said. ‘Forty-two passengers and the rest of the crew gone west – the survivor’s a steward, for a change.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Hospital, naturally. Don’t know which one they took him to- probably the Anglo-American between here and Villefranche – but I’ll find out for you in a jiff.’

‘Is he badly hurt?’

‘Apart from shock and shakings, not really – and that’s a change too. He was dead lucky, that one. Dead lucky. In the baggage compartment, you know. Near the tail – so when that broke off…’ he shrugged, smiled and added: ‘He made it.’

‘Which way was the plane landing?’ Solo asked.

‘Coming in from the Cannes direction. I told you, didn’t I? I saw him take it right down on to – I was going to say *into* – the deck. Must have been a muckup on the altitude stage of the Murchison-Spears gear. Must have been…And there’s another thing. Just occurred to me, as a matter of fact. Had you noticed – all three…no; four! All four of the crashes here have been *landing?* None taking off, no wrong trims, no stalling or any of that nonsense. Which again supports the idea of it being altitude evaluation at fault, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ Solo said slowly. ‘You have a point there. I guess it does, at that.’

‘Oh, most definitely, old chap. No doubt about it.’

‘Any V.I.P.’s aboard, by the way?’

‘All holidaymakers or businessmen – fortunately.’

Illya smiled a crooked smile.’ “There’s less to pay with T.C.A., Because of the care they give you there”,’ he quoted softly.

The Technical Director looked flustered. ‘Oh, no, old chap. I mean really,’ he protested, puffing great clouds of smoke from the pipe. ‘Of

course *any* passenger's death is a tragedy. Naturally. Perhaps I didn't express myself too well…But it's just that if V.I.P.'s *are* involved, so many bods kick up such a stink that one simply cannot get down to one's job… which is, after all, to find out what happened and why.'

Solo clapped him on the shoulder. 'Never mind,' he said with a grin. 'Don't take us too seriously…old chap!…nobody else seems to.'

A smoke-grimed tender, the legends *Sapeurs-Pompiers* and *Ville de Nice* blistered on its scarlet sides, passed them on its way to the exit gates in convoy with three closed ambulances. A young fireman dropped from the tender, wrenched off his metal helmet, and was quietly sick into a clump of bushes.

Dang – Dong – Dinggg…the three-chime call sign of the airport announcing system shouldered its incongruous way through the confusion. *'Lufthansa regret to announce the cancellation of their Flight number…'* The amplified words echoing from the P.A. speakers sounded oddly thin out of doors. Solo and Illya Kuryakin walked round to the T.C.A. maintenance unit and waited for the Technical Director to find them the name of the hospital to which the plane's only survivor bad been transported. Helga Grossbreitner was in the main office, lovely as ever if a little harassed, coping with a flood of calls on three different phones. She had heard the news on the radio as soon as she got home, and had hurried to the airport at once to offer what help she could to the airline's staff.

The hospital was a small one, lying somewhere back behind the harbour. The two agents drove past rows of small shops – still brightly lit even at this late hour – a couple of pavement cafés thronged with people, and a terrace of old houses. Beyond the mellowed ochre facades with their delicate iron balconies, an apartment block reared towards the sky. Between the two, an archway spanned the entrance to the hospital driveway.

They drove through and found themselves among trees. A double row of planes bordered each side of the drive and carried the eye on to the hospital itself. It was an elegant building in the style of the old houses at one side of the entrance – tall, narrow, weathered shutters leading on to the balconies and a shallow roof sheltering painted friezes.

Half-way along the avenue, the Peugeot's motor coughed to a halt. 'That's funny,' Illya murmured as the car lost way. 'Why should the thing suddenly…' He turned the starter key and stabbed at the pedals

experimentally. The starter motor revolved, but the engine wouldn't catch. Kuryakin operated the switch again. Once more the starter spun…but there was no sign of life from under the bonnet. The acrid tang of petrol drifted through the tonneau.

'You've flooded her now,' Solo said. 'Sounded to me like some kind of ignition failure. Perhaps we'd better have a look.'

Illya pulled on the handbrake and opened his door to get out.

In the dense shadows beneath the plane trees a man squatted beside a cumbersome box-like machine on a tripod. Above the swivel mounting an attachment like a wide lens with a long hood pointed at the front of the car.

'Look out!' Solo shouted suddenly.

Moving with incredible speed, he leaned across Kuryakin and yanked the door shut. Then, in a single complex movement, he slumped back against his own door, opening it with his elbow, and subsided backwards on to the ground, dragging the Russian bodily after him.

'Napoleon! What the…? What are you…' Illya gasped as he landed in the grass beside the roadway. 'What was that…?'

'Quick!' Solo hissed. 'Into the bushes…'

The soft explosions of the silenced revolvers wielded by the men on the far side of the drive were hardly audible as they wriggled backwards into the shrubbery. Bullets thwacked heavily into the leaves above their heads..

'Did you see them?' Solo whispered. 'Four, I think – two on each side of the guy with that tripod thing.'

'Yes, I saw. Just an instant before you pulled the door shut. I'm afraid my reaction was very delayed…I wasn't expecting to be ambushed. But at least we know why the motor stopped.'

'What d'you mean?'

'The thing on the tripod. I saw them testing one like it in Eastern Germany some time ago. It's an electronic gadget – creates a field of force which will put any electrical machinery in its orbit out of commission. Too short range for general use – they've only been able to make them with an effective field of three or four yards so far – but perfect for a job like this!'

'So in effect it *was* ignition failure? The field stops the coil functioning properly, I suppose?'

‘Yes – look out! I think they’re going to rush us…’ The shooting had stopped. A hundred yards to their right, the lighted windows of the hospital stared impersonally down the drive. On their left, the glare of the city silhouetted the archway through which they had driven a few minutes before. Straight ahead, the dark bulk of the stationary car masked the adversaries whose stealthy movements they could just hear over the rumble of distant traffic.

‘I guess they’ll be fanning out,’ Solo murmured. ‘Cross the drive further up and come down through the shrubberies to take us on the flank…’

But for a long time nothing happened. The two men lay in the soft mould under the bushes straining every nerve to see or hear a significant movement, their guns at the ready. Once Illya reached out for a fragment of tree branch lying on the ground and pitched it into a clump of oleanders some way to their left. At once the plopping of the silenced guns recommenced. Twigs and morsels of leaf shredded to the ground as the heavy slugs ripped through the bushes.

‘They *have* spread out, Napoleon,’ the Russian whispered. ‘Those shots were coming from almost opposite the place that branch landed…’

He groped around in the mould and discovered a flat stone half buried in the loam. Prising it loose, he spun it a dozen yards away in the opposite direction. Immediately it landed among the leaves a similar fusillade started. After a few seconds, it stopped.

‘You’re right,’ Solo muttered. ‘Dead opposite again. They’re strung out along the far side of the roadway. But I don’t get it: they’re at least five to two. Why don’t they cross higher up and rush us?’

Illya shook his head. From their place of concealment, the two agents peered anxiously up the drive, strained back to look up into the branches above their heads, and craned to see under the immobilised Peugeot.

Nothing happened.

Solo fired two shots at random under the car. The double crack of the unsilenced automatic was thunderously loud in the darkness under the trees. But there was no answering fire from across the drive.

‘I don’t like it,’ he said quietly. ‘It’s almost as though they were just keeping us pinned down. They only shoot if they think we’re trying to move. If they wanted to kill us, they could easily—’

He broke off abruptly, his head cocked to one side, listening. From somewhere up by the hospital there was a clatter of feet. Voices shouted and a door slammed. Then a car engine burst into life and a moment later twin head lamps blazed into view round a corner of the building and raced down the drive towards them. Fifty yards short of the Peugeot, the vehicle screeched to a halt. A wide door opened and two or three men ran from the bushes bordering the drive to pile inside. There was a grinding of gears, and the car lurched forward to stop again on the far side of their own.

‘They’re loading the tripod,’ Illya said, raising his gun arm as the driver engaged bottom gear and revved up the engine.

‘Wait!’ Solo laid a hand on his forearm and pressed it to the ground. ‘We might be sorry…Look.’

The vehicle emerged from behind the Peugeot and slowed down as it came opposite the oleanders into which Illya had thrown the branch. It was – they saw now that they were no longer blinded by its headlights – a Citroen ambulance, long and low. A final man swung aboard, and the ambulance gathered speed, rocketing down towards the archway, where it swung left into the street with a squeal of its low-pressure tyres.

Solo was already on his feet, running towards the hospital. ‘Come on!’ he shouted. ‘I’m afraid we’ll be too late, but we have to see.’

They pelted down the drive and burst in through the double swing doors. In the middle of the tiled foyer a uniformed porter lay on his back with outflung arms. A bullet hole in the centre of his forehead stared upwards like an obscene third eye. A receptionist slumped across the inquiry desk, her starched cap resting in a pool of blood. On the graceful curve of the stairway sprawled two male nurses in short white jackets.

At the far end of the entrance hall, a young nurse stood petrified by the open door of a lift, her eyes wide with horror.

‘Nurse!’ Solo rapped. ‘Quick! The man from the air crash – the survivor…What ward’s he in?’

‘Numbers-seventeen…F-f-first floor,’ the girl faltered. ‘What happened? I c-c-can’t understand—’

But Solo and Illya were already half way up the shallow flight of stairs. They dashed down the rubber-tiled corridor, paused at an intersection to consult an indicator board, and then hurried on to the far end of a passage.

The general wards appeared to be situated on the higher floors, for the doors were so close together that the rooms on the first floor must be quite small. No. 17 was the last on the left.

Solo pushed it open and strode inside.

The narrow iron bedstead was empty, sheets, pillows and blankets tumbled in a heap on the floor beside it. Bottles, glasses and jars on the bedside table appeared undisturbed, but the grey-curtained screen which had been around the patient was folded back and now leaned against a wall.

‘God damn it!’ Solo exclaimed bitterly in a rare moment of profanity. ‘Abducted under our eyes! Those THRUSH men in the drive *were* told just to keep us pinned down. We could have made a break for it and at least tried to stop them, if only we’d realized…’ He broke off with an exasperated shrug.

Illya was touching his arm. There was a movement on the far side of the bed.

In two strides, Solo was across the room. A nurse lay face downwards on the floor. As he bent to grasp her shoulders, she groaned and shook her head.

‘Easy, easy,’ he soothed in French as he hauled her to her feet. ‘Take it easy. It’s all over now. Nobody’s going to harm you…There. Sit down in this chair…Illya, give her a glass of water, will you?…’

They propped the woman up and placed a pillow so that she could lean her head against the wall. Congealed blood traced a network of lines from a dark contusion on her temple, but otherwise she seemed undamaged. Kuryakin soaked a wad of cotton wool in water and gently bathed the wound as she slowly recovered her senses. ‘It’s all right; it’s all right,’ he said quietly as recollection flamed in her eyes. ‘We have come to help you. Take your time…and then tell us what happened…’

The nurse was a thin, grey haired woman in her fifties, with a lined face. She made a visible effort to pull herself together, touched the ugly bruise with a trembling hand, and looked up at them dubiously.

‘What…what…Who are you? What do you want?’ she said at last in a weak voice.

‘We were trying to speak to your patient,’ Solo said, mastering his impatience. ‘But we were too late. He has been kidnapped, hasn’t he?

Please try to remember what happened.'

'What happened?…The patient!' She remembered suddenly and caught her breath, looking wildly towards the empty bed. 'Oh, those men! They hit him, they beat him so much…and then they…' She shuddered and began to cry, her spare body racked by great sobs.

Illya glanced again at the bed. There was blood on the undersheet, blood on the discarded pillows, splashes of blood on the tangle of blankets.

'Exactly what happened?' he repeated.

The woman pulled a handkerchief from her starched sleeve and dabbed at her eyes. 'Forgive me,' she said, sniffing. 'It was such a – a shock…The patient had hardly been here a half hour…'

'Was he badly hurt?'

'Not – not when he came in. Profoundly shocked, of course. And very badly shaken. But apart from bruises and – and – and superficial burns…he did not appear too much damaged. He was to have an X-ray examination to see if there were any internal injuries…I was preparing him…That's why I thought it so odd that they should send an ambulance from…from…'

'From where?' Solo prompted gently.

'They *said* they were from the Anglo-American hospital at Villefranche, Monsieur. As the man was an American, and he kept on talking, talking all the time in American – well, at first I thought maybe they had decided to transfer him to a hospital where they would understand what he said.'

'And later?'

'They appeared at the door with a stretcher, and they told me they had orders to transfer him. They had all the necessary pieces of paper, so I… well, I began to help them move him on to the stretcher. Then the patient himself seemed to question what they were doing…'

'He began to protest?'

'I could not understand what he said – I do not speak English – but I think so. They tried to pacify him…and so did I, as far as I was able. Then he attempted to get off the stretcher and they…they…Oh, it was horrible!… they hit him…'

'I understand. Do not distress yourself, Mademoiselle. They beat him unconscious, is that it?'

The woman nodded, the tears coursing down her cheeks. ‘I had begun to wonder, just before. For I know most of the orderlies at Villefranche, and I realized that I had never seen any of these men before. And although they spoke French well enough, there was, well, something about them…’

Solo nodded. ‘And then you queried their authority yourself?’

‘As soon as the first blow fell, of course. It was so rapid…so *vicious* – the poor man was unconscious almost before he had time to cry out. There were four of them, you see…

‘What did you do?’

‘Naturally I tried to stop them, Monsieur. But two of them held me – one with his hand over my mouth – while the others…finished their vile work with the patient. And then…and then – while they still held me – one of the other…a little dark fellow, he was…came over and hit me with a—’

The nurse stopped talking suddenly and pressed her clenched hands against her mouth.

‘And you have no idea, no idea at all, what the patient was talking about before they came in? You didn’t catch anything he said – even a single word – before he was beaten insensible?’

The woman shook her head dumbly.

‘He wasn’t entirely unconscious, Napoleon,’ Illya said. ‘Look.’

He had picked up from the floor the wooden board to which the patient’s temperature chart was clipped. Wordlessly, he held it out for Solo to see.

Below the thick black line which had begun to move out from the left hand margin, a wider, more vivid line in red wavered across the squared paper. And above it, two hastily daubed symbols stood out against the white in the same sticky medium.

‘He must have used his finger to write us a message,’ Illya said soberly, ‘using his own blood as ink…’

CHAPTER TEN

AN EYE IN THE WALL

‘THE guy must have been lying apparently unconscious on the floor,’ Solo said. ‘And while THRUSH’s thugs were beating up the nurse, he opened his eyes and saw the chart where it had been knocked to the ground in the struggle.’

‘Yes,’ Illya said. ‘And he’d have only a moment before they picked him up to put him on the stretcher, so he’d have to work very fast. The thing is – how would his mind have worked and what was he trying to tell us with these daubs?’

They were back in the T.C.A. building at the airport. Matheson, the Technical Director, had lent them his office while he supervised the crash enquiry team working in the wreckage out on the floodlit runway, and they had decided to have a council of war before deciding on their next move.

Solo picked up the temperature chart with its gruesome symbols. ‘The guy’s a steward,’ he said, ‘so whatever information he has will at least be given with a semi-technical mind…Let’s analyse this thing properly.’

The survivor’s temperature had been logged five times – once when he was first put in the ambulance, again just before they reached the hospital, and three times, at quarter hour intervals, in Room 17. The graph joining the five blobs was almost flat: a heavy black line sloping faintly downwards towards the right hand side of the sheet with a uniform inclination. Standing on the line at its left hand end was a long thin rectangle drawn in blood, with a smaller, tall rectangle on top of it. Higher up, on the far side of the paper, a crudely executed dart shape with a crossed tail dipped its nose towards the rectangles. There was a facsimile of the black line laboriously

traced in red about an inch lower down the sheet. And apart from a few smudges below the dart shape, that was all…

‘Well, one thing seems clear,’ Solo said at last. ‘Whatever the message is, it’s not in any way an attempt at actual writing: there’s nothing here remotely like lettering. So what we have to solve is a picture puzzle.’

‘I agree. And I should think it fairly certain that this sort of thin arrowhead with a stroke across its tail is meant to represent the aircraft, wouldn’t you?’ Illya asked. ‘It’s not at all unlike a Trident.’

‘Yeah. Landing, I guess, since the nose points down…So okay: he’s painting us a picture of the plane coming in to land. So what’s the significance of the two box-like bits on top of each other? How do you figure them?’

‘I think…Wait a minute, Napoleon! Suppose he was using the existing line – the black line of the graph – to represent the ground…’

‘Yeah?’

‘…then surely the two rectangles might be a simple way of indicating the airport buildings with the control tower above them?’

‘They might at that,’ Solo admitted. ‘But then so what? We just have a picture of a plane landing. It doesn’t tell us anything about the landing – or about the wreck.’

‘Oh, but it could do, Napoleon. Don’t forget these smudges. I don’t think they are random. They are very faint, but they are in a very definite line… coming downwards from the plane – Look! – and reaching the red line below the black one. There are none above the plane and none below the red line.’

‘Kind of like a dotted line, it seems.’

‘Exactly. And what’s implied by a dotted line – in strip cartoons, for example.’

Solo considered. ‘As far as I’m concerned,’ he said slowly, ‘a dotted line between two objects implies some kind of relationship between them – nothing more, in the absence of other data.’

‘But that’s just it! A relationship between the plane – the red plane – and the red line…’

‘I still don’t quite see—’

‘Look at the red line,’ Illya said excitedly. ‘Everything else has been scrawled roughly, daubed in great haste. But the red line has been done very carefully; laboriously, even. In the desperate hurry he was in to get the message across before he was discovered, he took time to get this bit exactly right.’

‘How do you mean – exactly right?’

‘It repeats the black line very precisely: same slope, same slight differences where the blobs occur, same length – see, it ends on the very same line of the graph paper.’

‘But if the black line represents the ground, as we think…

‘Then the red one also represents the ground.’

‘But that’s crazy, Illya! One plane, one set of buildings, but *two* landing grounds – No! Wait a minute!…It’s not so crazy, is it?…One plane, one set of buildings, and two landing grounds, *only one of which is related to the plane.* Is that it?’

‘That’s it. And the “ground” related to the plane by the dotted line is *lower* than the real one, the one with the airport buildings on it. I’m sure that’s it.’

‘You mean he’s trying to tell us, via this dotted line, that – so far as the plane was concerned – the ground appeared to be lower than it really was?’

‘Yes – and if the pilot, or in this case the Murchison-Spears equipment, is informed the ground is lower than it really is—’

‘The aircraft will obviously level off too late; it’ll fly straight in. Just as though, in an old fashioned crate, the altimeter was reading incorrectly.’

‘Exactly.’

Solo picked up the chart, scrutinized it, and laid it down on Matheson’s desk. ‘Okay, wonder boy,’ he said with a grin. ‘Sold to the gentleman with the rich uncle! And if the survivor was tipping us off that the crash was due to faulty evaluation of height by the Murchison-Spears box, that ties in with what we already know, doesn’t it?’

‘It does. Witnesses all say the aircraft “flew into the ground”; the survivor from the fast crash was babbling something about “it” being *too high;* Matheson advised us to look for a fault in that particular stage of the gear. It all ties in. I suppose the survivor meant that the *ground,* as it were, was too high: it rose up and hit them.’

The door opened and Helga Grossbreitner came into the room. She hurried across to a filing cabinet, pushing a strand of golden hair that had worked loose out of her eyes.

‘Sorry to interrupt you, boys,’ she said absently, flicking through a stack of folders. ‘Oh, dear – those poor people. I’m trying to deal with inquiries from relatives and friends. It is really most distressing…’

‘It’s a tough job, honey,’ Solo sympathized. ‘But don’t worry: I think we may be on our way.’

‘You mean you’ve found out who’s fixing these terrible crashes?’

‘Not the actual individuals – though we know it must be THRUSH members. But we do have a line on *how* it’s being done…and once we’ve established that definitely, it should be easy enough to pin down the culprits.’

‘But that’s good. What have you found out?’

Solo gave her a brief résumé of the conclusions they had arrived at and the evidence which had led to them, adding: ‘And I’m real sorry; Helga – I guess I have to stand you up on that date tomorrow night…tonight, I mean: it’s already past one a.m.’

She flashed him her golden smile. ‘That’s okay, lover boy. It’ll keep – and me with it. What’s the big deal, then?’

‘We have to check our deductions, honey. No good acting on them unless we can prove they’re right. Illya and I will go to Paris and fly into Nice tomorrow on the T.C.A. Trident – the same flight as the one that crashed here this evening – and keep watch in the pilot’s cabin to see what we can see. They seem to be stepping up the disaster rate and there’s always a chance that we may find something out.’

‘Yes, I guess that seems sensible – but, darling, you will be careful, won’t you? I can’t have another date broken!’

Solo patted her rounded shoulder. ‘I’ll take an ejector seat and a ’chute,’ he promised with a grin. ‘Expect me to drop in any time after nine…’

After the girl had found the file she wanted and returned to the outer office, Kuryakin looked up from some notes he had been consulting. ‘You know, Napoleon, there’s one angle of this case that we haven’t taken into account at all,’ he said seriously.

‘What’s that?’

‘T.C.A.’s franchise to carry the fissionable material from here to the U.S. We haven’t looked into that end of it at all. Do you think we should?’

Solo shook his head. ‘I guess that wouldn’t figure in the case until *after* THRUSH had gained control of the airline,’ he said. ‘From their point of view, the number one priority is to discredit the company to the extent that they can take it over. Until they have achieved that, they *can* afford to ignore the radioactive bit. It only goes on one flight a month anyway – and there’s a squad of men with automatic rifles guarding the armoured car that brings it to the airport…Besides there’s no question of the crashes being in any way connected with an attempt to grab the stuff.’

‘You are sure, Napoleon?’

‘Sure I’m sure. All the crashes are on incoming planes, and the fissionable material is flown out.’

‘Yes, of course. I just thought I’d mention it.’

‘Quite right, my boy! Quite right…And now let’s go grab some sleep. We have to be back here on the first available flight to Paris tomorrow morning.’

‘You really meant what you told Helga?’

‘Certainly. We’ll sit right up in the front of that Trident with our slide rules and our compasses, watching every move,’ Solo said with a curious emphasis. He opened the door and ushered the Russian out of the office.

A shutter fell noiselessly over the concealed lens of the video-tape camera which had been recording their conversation from its hiding place behind a relief map of Europe which hung on one wall.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SOLO AND ILLYA TAKE A BACK SEAT

A FRINGE of waves laced the edge of the blue-green Mediterranean as the Trident turned in a shallow bank and headed east along the coast towards Nice, gradually losing height. There had been stray banks of cumulus building up over the Basses Alpes and their passage over the Rhone delta had been quite bumpy. Once they passed Toulon, however, the sky cleared and the air was calm and still as the giant plane sank into the dusk which was beginning to shroud the fishing villages south of the Massif des Maures. The creased, iridescent surface of the sea dulled to a sombre violet, reflecting the pinpoints of light beginning to twinkle among the craft massed in the harbours of Lavandou and St. Tropez.

Illya Kuryakin crouched with Solo in the aircraft's rear baggage department, fiddling with a mass of dials which studded the steel surface of a complicated chassis packed, with other electronic equipment, in a huge suitcase lying open before them. The whining roar of the three jet engines above their heads made conversation difficult in the confined space.

Solo glanced at his wrist watch. 'Stand by for action any time now,' he shouted over the din. 'We should be just about over Ste Maxime.'

The Russian nodded, spreading a sheet of squared paper marked with labelled columns across a board and clipping it in place at the top and sides. 'I hope your hunch is correct, Napoleon,' he called back. 'I should have spotted that camera myself. Where exactly was it?'

'You know that enormous relief map fixed to one wall of Matheson's office – the one with all the mountains in Europe humped up across the surface?'

‘Yes, I saw it.’

‘Well, you probably noticed that all the airports between the mountains – and those on the plains for that matter – were marked by small circles of coloured glass; presumably to light up when T.C.A. planes were using them, or needed maintenance there or something.’

Kuryakin nodded again.

‘The camera lens had replaced the glass indicating one of the airports among the Alps – Zurich, I think – where it was least likely to be noticed among the relief. Fortunately, I happened to see it just when there was a slight movement…probably an alteration of aperture…and the movement drew my attention to it.’

‘In turn, I hope *my* hunch is correct also,’ Illya said.

‘It has a good chance. If what you tell me of your theory is true, the exact location of the Murchison-Spears box is critical – which is why we’re lucky that T.C.A. equip their Tridents with a baggage compartment as far back as this.’

‘Yes, our duplicate box is as far away from the one in the cockpit as possible. I suppose that’s why you made such a point of mentioning that we would be up front with the pilots – to tempt them to concentrate on that end of the plane?’

‘Sure. I figure that, since they know we’re aboard and that we know something of the system at least, then they’re bound to try and bring the plane down. But it’s a terrible risk, in a way – the crew’s lives are at stake as well as our own.’

‘But we did manage to get all the passengers transferred to a relief flight ten minutes later, Napoleon.’

‘True. Nevertheless I – Wait a minute! The inter-com’s coming on!’

Over the noise of the jets, a metallic, disembodied voice was speaking: *‘Hallo, hallo. Third pilot here. We are just passing Fréjus and the M-S gear is in action. Are you ready to start operating? Are you ready to start operating?…’*

‘Solo to Third Pilot,’ Napoleon Solo called crisply above the racket of the jets. ‘We are ready to start…And just for the record, here’s a recap on the M.O. You have the aircraft’s normal M-S box in your cabin, receiving signals from Nice and the ground, and the box interprets these and adjusts

the plane's controls in such a way as to effect a correct landing. We have a duplicate M-S box back here, receiving the same signals but not hitched up in any way to the controls. The aim of the operation is to check the readings of the two boxes one against the other – and spot any discrepancies if present; okay?'

'*Roger. Our box up here has dials indicating distance from touchdown in metres, glide angle, and height in metres. I am to read you the relevant figures from our dials at quarter minute intervals, and you will write these down and check against your own readings at the same time.*'

'Roger. You can start any time you want.'

'*Willco. First reading coming up in fifteen seconds.*'

Solo picked up the board with its prepared paper and poised a ballpoint over its surface as Illya Kuryakin threw a switch and studied the needles trembling across the dials in the suitcase. In the dim lighting of the baggage compartment his bland face, normally so placid, appeared strained and anxious.

'*First reading,*' the clipped voice on the inter-com was saying: '*Distance seventeen thousand five hundred; glide angle five per cent; height five thousand and forty.*'

'Seventeen thousand five hundred; five per cent; five thousand and forty,' Solo repeated, writing the figures on the chart as Illya bent over the dials.

'Check,' the Russian called. 'One seven five double-oh; five; five-oh four-oh.'

Solo wrote the second set of figures below the first.

'*Second reading: fourteen six fifty; five per cent; four thousand six hundred.*'

Solo repeated the figures, wrote them down and looked across at Illya.

'Check,' Kuryakin called again. one four six five-oh; five; four six double-oh.'

'*Third reading: twelve thousand; eleven per cent; four thousand and fifty.*'

'Check. One two oh double-oh; eleven; four-oh five-oh…'

Through the small double window on the port side of the baggage compartment, isolated lights spangled the dark bulk of the alpine foothills

massing against the sky to the north. Something on one of the luggage racks creaked protestingly as the Trident's angle of descent steepened. Over the clamour of the engines, now altering in pitch, a faint rumble followed by two distinct thumps marked the lowering of the undercarriages.

'…Fifth reading: six thousand and twenty; fifteen percent; one thousand six hundred.'

'Check…'

The lights of the coastal strip streamed past the port window, long chains of street lamps, illuminated hotels and automobile headlights whirling past them into the blackness as the great plane forged inexorably onwards towards the invisible runway. Through the starboard porthole, a lighthouse far out to sea winked twice against the dark.

'Sixth reading: three thousand two hundred; eleven point five per cent; eight hundred and fifty.'

'Check. Three two double-oh; eleven point five – No! Wait, wait…the altitude reading's different! Napoleon – look!'

Solo was beside the dials in a flash. The needle of the height indicator was sinking steadily from 830 to 820.

The equipment in the cockpit, which was directing the plane's controls for landing, was registering the ground as between twenty and thirty metres lower than it really was…

'Seventh reading: eight hundred and fifty; seven per cent; two hundred and ten…'

The needle on the altimeter dial trembled past the 170 mark.

In seconds, the pointer would be at zero – while that on the gear controlling the aircraft would still show between 40 and 50…

'Emergency!' Solo shouted into the inter-com. 'Emergency! For God's sake take over on manual and overshoot – your altimeter reading's all to hell!'

'Willco.' A different voice spoke coolly from the amplifier. *'Second pilot speaking. Hold on – I am going to overshoot…'*

The thunder of the jets rose to a shrill scream; the Trident lurched forwards and up under the surge of power. Illya saw trees, airport buildings, car parks, a Boeing 707 being refuelled on the floodlit apron, whisk past and down, and then they were away and climbing over the glittering

crescent of the Baie des Anges with the twin ribbon of the Promenade des Anglais dwindling beneath them.

'…and tell your Navigator for God's sake to get a fix on the position where the readings began to differ – the sixth, I think it was,' Solo was calling as the Trident banked seawards in a steep climbing turn and headed back for its second run-in.

A few minutes later they made a perfect touchdown under manual control and taxied slowly back to the apron.

Matheson and the airport director met them in a jeep. 'I thought we'd be going back with two empty seats for a moment,' Matheson said as they climbed down the portable companionway to the ground. 'You were flying straight in to the deck like the one last night. Still – Warwick caught her just in time and all's well that ends well, eh? I expect you could do with a drink…'

Solo mopped his brow with a handkerchief. 'I guess it was a pretty close shave at that,' he admitted. 'As for that drink – the answer's Yes, please!… Illya's just superintending the unshipping of both sets of Murchison-Spears equipment that your boys can get to work right away on comparison tests. Now perhaps we'll be able to say just how the deed *is* done…'

But at midnight, Matheson came up to them in the airport restaurant, where they were sitting over coffee and cognac, and dropped into a vacant chair at their table with an expression of astonishment on his face. 'It beats me,' he said blankly. 'We've really done the most exhaustive tests on both sets of equipment – even had them taken up in a helicopter to check them under operating conditions – and what do you think we found?'

'That both sets were working perfectly – and giving precisely the same readings all along the line,' Solo said with a grin.

The Technical Director started, absently catching his empty pipe as it fell from his mouth. 'But that's just it!' he exclaimed. 'How on earth did you know? What have you chaps found out?'

'We don't *know,'* Illya said. 'It was a reasonable deduction; it fits the pattern, that's all."

'Well, I'm blessed! You mean something or somebody distorts the altitude stage of the gear as the plane lands – but that it's returned to normal a short while afterwards?'

‘Yes.’

‘And that whatever it is has such a fine adjustment that it’ll bitch up equipment in the nose of the plane – but leave similar gear in the tail unaffected ?’

‘That’s what we think.’

‘Well, I’m blessed,’ Matheson said again. ‘All the same, it doesn’t really get us much forrader, does it? I mean we’re confirmed in our ideas of what happens – roughly – but we’re no nearer to finding out who does it. Or how.’

‘I think you mistake our aims, Mr. Matheson,’ Solo said. ‘The point of the operation was, of course, to confirm this – but the main idea was to find out *where* it’s done from. And that in turn will give us a lead to *who.’*

‘*Can* you find out where it’s done from, then?’

‘If your Navigator has been able to fix the position of the place where the readings began to differ – yes, we should be able to. Has he managed, do you know?’

‘Yes, he has, as a matter of fact. He asked me to tell you. All the gen’s up in the tower, if you’d care to come along.’ Illya went to see if he could find any news of Sheridan Rogers while Solo and Matheson made their way to the chart room of the control tower. He joined them a few minutes later with a long face. ‘I’m very much afraid, Napoleon,’ he said shaking his head sadly, ‘that things look very black for that girl. She hasn’t been seen since the night she came out to dinner with us at Villefranche – apart from that disagreeable incident at Haut-de-Cagnes, that is. She didn’t show up for her shift yesterday morning – and there’s still no reply from her flat.’

‘Relax, Illya,’ Solo said soberly. ‘Whatever’s happened to her, she’s not the bird we’re looking for: the thrush flies in quite a different direction.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Take a look at this.’ The Chief Enforcement Officer of U.N.C.L.E. was sitting with Matheson at a huge table strewn with papers. In the centre was a large-scale map of the coast from Fréjus to the Italian border.

‘We’ve charted the Trident’s flight path here,’ Solo continued, pointing with a pencil at a dotted red line running approximately south-west to north-east a few hundred metres off the coastline. ‘And the Navigator has given us a fix on the position where the two sets of gear began to register

differently – that is, the place where whatever it is began to affect the box in the cockpit. We were exactly *here'* – he leaned over and made a mark across the dotted line – 'when the Third Pilot was reading out the details of the sixth check. Right?'

Kuryakin nodded, looking intently at the chart.

'Right. Well, here's the touchdown point.' He made another mark a short distance from the end of the runway indicated on the map. 'And we have already agreed that whatever device is beamed at the planes must be pretty short-range.'

'Yes – otherwise it could presumably reach them when they were flying in from the other side of the airport…landing from north-east to south-west.'

'Sure. So looking at these two points and the distance between them – and bearing in mind the distance between each of them and the *far* end of the runway – would you agree that ten kilometres would seem a fair estimate to allow for the range?'

Illya studied the chart for a few minutes in silence.

'Ye-e-es,' he said slowly at last. 'Yes, I guess so, Napoleon.'

'Okay. And we have further agreed that the device is probably operated from one of the hill villages just inland from the coast, right?'

'Right.'

'Swell. That's all we need then.' Solo picked up set square, protractor and scale, and set to work on the map. 'Here's the position of the sixth reading…here. And here's the touchdown point…here. Now if we mark off the ten kilometre range and triangle inland…like *this*…we should be able to narrow down the number of hill villages we have to consider.' He ruled a final line and stood back from the table.

Kuryakin stepped forward and gazed at the wedge of country thus marked off. 'There's only one village eligible, then,' he said slowly. 'Vence is too far inland; Gattieres and La Colle are just outside the triangle.'

'Exactly. There's only one hill village *in* the triangle – and that's St. Paul-de-Vence.'

'But Napoleon…'

Solo sighed. He looked past Matheson and out of the window at the darkened airfield. The lights of a liner moved slowly across the sea beyond.

From the floor above the voice of the controller in the green-windowed operations room could be heard faintly as he talked down a private plane that was landing.

‘I know,’ he said at last. ‘I know. Helga has an apartment in St. Paul-de-Vence. And apart from Matheson here and the crew of the plane, Helga was the only person we told of our plan. The only one…’

CHAPTER TWELVE

AN INTERRUPTED JOURNEY

THE small, dark man with the bad-tempered expression dropped the spool of tape back into its box, shut the lid of the portable recorder, and got out of the car. He walked across the parking lot and pushed open the swing doors leading to the foyer of the airport buildings. Inside there was a babel of transatlantic voices: the Air France flight from New York had just arrived and the place was a seething mass of holidaymakers, porters and taxi drivers. In the alcove behind the semicircular inquiry desk where the post office and *bureau de change* were housed, there was a queue of passengers waiting to change money and send telegrams announcing their safe arrival. It was some minutes before the trim brunette dealing with the post office section was able to connect him with the telephone number he asked for.

'Your call to Cros-de-Cagnes, *Monsieur,*' she said at length. 'Cabin number two, please – on the left.'

The dark man scowled more darkly still and shouldered open the door of the booth. Snatching the receiver from its cradle, he asked brusquely for Madame Vernier, drumming his fingers impatiently on the glass while he waited for his correspondent to come to the phone. The fingers were short, spatulate, nicotine-stained, the bitten nails rimmed with black.

Eventually a female voice rasped in the receiver at his ear.

'Hallo, Celeste?' the dark man said. 'You certainly took your time. Where in hell were you?…Never mind, never mind. Look – there's important information to relay. Is Number One up at the house?'

He waited while the receiver quacked in reply and then spoke again.

‘Okay. Pass this on – and listen carefully. There was a conference in the director’s office this morning. I was able to get it bugged in time and I’ve just played back the tape. The fools are going to try their little detective game again…Yes, tonight – on the flight from Paris. But get this: it’s not the same flight they tried last night…No. It’s the later one, the one that lands at ten thirty-five…Of course it’s a T.C.A. flight, you idiot. They’re flying up to Orly in a private plane later this afternoon, and they’ll pick up the Trident there…God knows. They don’t seem to have a clue. I suppose they’ll just sit and watch, poor fools…Yes; yes of course…And I hope to God the people up at the house don’t bungle it again tonight. I can’t think what went wrong…No – they didn’t mention it at all…Stay where you are after you’ve reported. I may have more news later. ’Bye.’

The big woman in the orange towelling beach robe replaced the receiver momentarily and then lifted it again. As soon as the high-pitched calling tone sounded, she dropped two 20-centime pieces into the coin box and dialled a number. The tone changed to a continuous burble, there was a click, and then the melodious single note repeated which indicated that the number was ringing.

Outside the beach café, a wind whipped foam from the tops of the waves. A few bathers were daring the backwash, but most of the holidaymakers sat or lay on striped mattresses on the shingle. Waiters in aprons and tee shirts bustled up to the bar with orders for drinks. It was hot and close in the small wooden building.

The woman in the beach robe pushed a strand of wet hair from her eyes. The ringing tone had stopped; the receiver at the other end had been lifted.

‘Hallo?’ she said. ‘Madame? Celeste here. Larsen has just telephoned an urgent report. Solo and the Russian are going to try again. They are flying to Orly this afternoon to catch the T.C.A. Trident coming in to Nice tonight. I am to emphasize that they’ll be on the *later* flight: the one that lands at ten thirty-five.’

She paused and listened for a moment.

‘No, Madame. Larsen managed to tape a conference in the director’s office, but apparently nothing was mentioned about the methods they were using…No, they said nothing about last night’s flight…No. Nothing about that either. He didn’t know if they knew an attempt had been made or not…Yes, ten thirty-five…Very good, Madame.’

She replaced the receiver, pushed through the hanging bead curtain and walked back, under a rattan awning that was flapping in the wind, to the crowded beach.

Solo and Illya, however, did not in fact fly to Orly airport.

Under an aching blue sky scoured clean of clouds by the *mistral*, the twin-engined Cessna was crossing the gaunt limestone peaks between Briancon and Gap when Solo leaned forward and tapped the pilot on the shoulder. ‘We’ve changed our plans,’ he said. ‘Will you please radio Grenoble and ask permission to land there?’

The pilot looked over his shoulder, his eyebrows raised in astonishment.

‘Yes, I know it’s not in accordance with the flight plan we filed,’ Solo said. ‘But I think you’ll find it’s okay. Just tell them to check back with Nice if there’s any difficulty…’ He sank back into his seat and grinned at Illya.

‘Do you think Mr. Waverly will have been able to arrange the helicopter in time, Napoleon?’ Kuryakin asked.

‘I guess so. I had the cipher radioed to him at ten o’clock this morning. He’ll be hopping mad at having to organize things in the middle of the night – God knows what time it was in New York then! – but the ‘copter will be there all right.’

‘Do you think THRUSH will have swallowed the bait?’

‘Let’s hope so. I don’t see why not. Our security was watertight on the details of last night’s flight. Only a handpicked team of Matheson’s best men knew we had taken a duplicate Murchison-Spears box aboard. And the comparison tests were carried out in complete secrecy. I’m pretty sure our birdlike friends have no idea of the line we’re following.’

‘So they’ll have no idea we were in the tail of the aircraft – or why their device failed to make it crash as usual?’

‘I guess not. I hope not. That’s why I was so careful to have nothing mentioned about it at the conference this morning.

‘And why you broadcast the fact that we *were* having a conference so much?’

‘Sure. I figured they were bound to have the room bugged when they knew it was on. And once they learn we’re going to have another go, they’re certain to make another attempt to bring the plane down. After all,

so far as they know, we just sit in the cockpit holding a watching brief – and there's no reason why their device should fail a second time. Only this time we won't be on the plane at all: we'll try to steal up behind them and catch them in the act as the Trident comes in.'

'There's no chance they'll find out we haven't gone all the way through to Orly – and call the attempt off?'

'No. Not a soul at Nice knew we intended to land at Grenoble. I asked Waverly to delay sending instructions about the altered flight plan until after we'd taken off. And once they'd seen us leave, THRUSH's agents would stop covering the airport – so even if there was a leak when Waverly came through, there'd be nobody around to hear it and report.'

'I see. That's why you insisted that the arrangements for the helicopter were made through New York instead of through Station M?'

'Yeah, that's it.'

'Well,' Illya said, leaning his forehead against the cabin window and squinting down at the jagged serrations of the mountains five thousand feet below them, 'it only takes six hours to get to Grenoble from Nice by car. If they send us one of the new Sikorskys, we should be able to make St. Paul an hour and a half before the Trident's due and still have time for a leisurely dinner at the Relais des Alpes before we take off…'

The pilot, who had for some time been talking into the radio microphone, replaced it on its hook under the instrument panel and half turned towards them with one arm extended in the thumbs-up signal.

Banking steeply, the Cessna dropped six hundred feet in an air pocket over the summit of La Meije and then flattened out for the long glide down the valley of the Drac to Grenoble.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

OUTDOOR FIREWORKS

ST. PAUL-DE-VENCE is one of the most typical of the mediaeval ‘perching’ villages which stud the hilltops just inland from the Cote d’AZur. It is also one of the most expensive: the slopes of the tree-clad *collines* surrounding it are terraced with high-income villas and building land raises from 45 to 300 dollars a square yard. The village itself is built on a spur and lies entirely within ramparts rising steeply from the valleys on either side. There is only one entrance, through an ancient arch in the wall. Inside, the cobbled streets separating concentric rings of old houses are too narrow for cars, and those rising to the two tiny squares in the centre are stepped every few yards.

Napoleon Solo peered down through the perspex blister of the Sikorsky as they flew across from the north. There was something wrong with the village – something unexpected which he could not quite place. Beyond, a distant chain of bright lights marked the motor road which ran beside the shore. But here…

‘It’s a funny thing,’ he began, turning to Illya Kuryakin.

‘I know,’ the Russian cut in, looking over Solo’s shoulder.

‘The place is in darkness. There’s not a light in the whole village. Even the street lamps seem to be out.’

From below, a vivid red streak arrowed through the air towards them, accelerating fiercely as it approached. There was a bright flash a hundred feet beneath the helicopter, then a shower of stars subsided gently earthwards.

The pilot seconded to them from the Deuxième Bureau turned his head and laughed. ‘St. Paul is *en fête* tonight, *messieurs,’* he said.

‘Fireworks!’ Solo exclaimed in relief. ‘For a moment you had me worried there: I thought THRUSH had dreamed up an anti-aircraft battery!’

Three two-stage rockets fizzed upwards to their left, bursting into golden streamers which exploded again to release red, blue and green stars.

‘Every August the municipality put on this giant display,’ the pilot said. ‘Some years it lasts an hour and a half, two hours. It is the most lavish spectacle in Europe. Truly it is fantastic!’

‘What is it for?’ Illya asked.

The pilot lifted his hands from the controls and spread his arms in a Gallic gesture. ‘For people to see, *monsieur,’* he said. ‘To enjoy. Part of the season. They come from all over the South to watch-see, the roads for two kilometres around the village are choked with parked automobiles…There will be tens of thousands of people sitting on the terrace walls of the vineyards. The spectacle is free, after all. It is very good for the tourism.’

‘But how can such a small village afford this huge display?’

‘St. Paul is not large, but the municipality is very rich. Many wealthy people live there. And what else can they do with all the tax they gather? The place is enclosed. There is electricity, water, drainage. There is no room for expensive improvements, wider roads and that sort of thing. So why not spend some money on enjoyment?’

‘A very civilized attitude,’ Solo said. ‘I wish we had known of this before. Still – it should make our task easier. *All* the lighting is switched off during the display?’

‘Everything. Even the street lighting on the roads leading to St. Paul. For the finale, they re-enact the sacking of the town by the Saracens, with smoke screens and red flares to simulate the burning. Then the lights come on and there is a fair outside the gates, in the *place* where the old men play *pétanque* under the plane trees. It is very gay.’

The Sikorsky was sinking slowly into the deep valley beyond the spur. It skimmed the top of a geometrically planted orange grove and settled gently down in a field. Beyond the dark bulk of the ramparts, the sky shimmered with silver rain.

The pilot handed them out climbing ropes, crampons, a pick. ‘Good luck, messieurs,’ he said. ‘If one may venture a question…?’

‘By all means.’

‘You have to negotiate an extremely steep, rough hillside, scale a seventy metre cliff and then climb the stone ramparts to get in. At the other end of the village is an open gate with a road leading through. Why do you not use that?’

Solo laughed. ‘There are many THRUSH agents here whom we do no know by sight – but who may know us,’ he said. ‘Even in a crowd, we might be recognized. And the success of this operation depends on surprise. So we enter by the least expected route…’

The pilot waved goodbye and slid shut the perspex canopy. Soon, the clatter of the helicopter’s rotors was dying away in the sky towards Nice.

Illya and Solo walked across the field, threaded their way through the rows of a small vineyard and began the stiff climb to the rock face. The going was rough, the ground uneven and tussocky – and the sporadic bursts of different coloured light erupting in the sky were more of a hindrance to their progress than a help. By the time they reached the foot of the cliff, they were out of breath and drenched in perspiration.

From directly below, the bluff and the ramparts surmounting it looked enormous: a giant’s castle bulked against a fairy-story sky. Solo unhitched the rope from his shoulder and knotted one end around his waist. ‘We could do with a handful of those magic beans right now,’ he observed with a wry grin. ‘However – let’s get on with it…’

Apart from the mutter and snap of fireworks from the other side of the town, the night was quiet – and the *mistral* which had been blowing when they left for Grenoble had died down as suddenly as it had started. The cliff was not quite perpendicular but it was a difficult enough climb in the fitful light. The first fifty feet were the easiest, the rock being seamed and fissured with pockets of soil and vegetation to afford them footholds. After that the face became steeper, the weathered slabs larger and smoother. Having forced their way up a narrow chimney with shoulders and feet, they came to a halt on a ledge.

‘It’s no good, Napoleon,’ Illya gasped. ‘We’ll have to use the crampons from now on.’

Tapping the steel spikes into the rock seemed to them to raise echoes loud enough to waken the dead. But no heads appeared silhouetted against the ramparts far above; no searchlight beam split the night to discover them spread like flies against the wall. Laboriously, painfully, with screaming

muscles, they forged upwards. Once the rock crumbled when Solo put his weight on a crampon, and the spike fell out and down, to tinkle from boulder to boulder in the darkness beneath. Solo grabbed wildly at the cliff face, his fingers tearing on the eroded stone. For a moment he arrested his fall, then the rock crumbled again and with a strangled cry of warning to Kuryakin, who was in the lead, he plunged downwards to the full length of the rope. Fortunately the Russian had one arm round a crag, preparing to knock in another crampon. As Solo called, he flung the other arm around the projecting rock and tensed himself for the shock as the agent's full weight jerked appallingly on the rope circling his waist.

Gritting his teeth, the Russian hung on, his lips drawn back with effort and his forehead beaded with sweat. For a giddy moment, Solo swung like a pendulum in space. Then his threshing feet found interstices in the rock face and he was able slowly to fight his way back to his former position. A few minutes later, they reached the top of the cliff. Across a stretch of grass, only the stone rampart, leaning away from them into the night, separated them from St. Paul.

'Thanks, Illya,' Solo panted. 'I'd have been a goner if you hadn't held on.'

'I cannot say it was a pleasure,' Kuryakin replied. 'But I certainly wasn't prepared to complete this mission alone!…Let's move along this way a bit before we climb the wall: the crevices look wider over there.'

Facing the rough-hewn blocks side by side, they edged along the foot of the rampart. Suddenly the Russian froze, his hand outstretched in astonishment.

'What's up?' Solo whispered. 'Why did you stop?'

Wordlessly, Kuryakin gestured to his right. Solo looked over his shoulder and gave a low whistle of amazement.

On a level with their heads, a pair of naked feet dangled against the wall. The ankles were bound together with wire. Above the legs was a body. And from behind the lolling head, a rope stretched tautly up into the dark to disappear over the parapet on top of the rampart.

Illya produced a small flashlight from his breast pocket and switched it on. In the pencil beam they saw the body was that of a man in pyjamas, the striped material splotched brown with old bloodstains. The dead face was lacerated and swollen, with bulging eyes and protruding tongue. Cuts and

bruises scarred the bared chest. The man's hands had been tied behind his back.

'It must be the survivor they abducted from the hospital,' Solo whispered. 'Poor devil. They must have tortured him to find out what he knew – and then tied him up, put the rope around his neck, and thrown him over to strangle slowly in the dark…'

Illya shuddered. 'It is horrible,' he said. 'This nest of evil must be smoked out, Napoleon. We can do nothing for the poor man now. Let's go.'

The final climb up the sloping wall of the rampart was not too difficult and soon they were peering cautiously over the parapet. A raised concrete promenade ran about four feet beneath the lip. Below this was a narrow roadway, on the far side of which clustered the tall, shuttered houses of the village. Not a soul was to be seen, not a light showed: obviously the inhabitants were outside the walls on the far side of the town, watching the display.

Quietly they dropped to the ground, unfastening the rope and stowing it together with the remainder of the climbing equipment behind a bollard. A line already fastened to this rose to the parapet and disappeared over the top: here undoubtedly was the other end of the rope from which hung the murdered survivor…

Above the tumble of pantiled Provençal roofs surmounting the narrow houses on the far side of the street, a second rank of buildings rose higher into the sky. It was in the upper storey of one of these, looking across the lower roofs to the coast, that Helga Grossbreitner's apartment was situated, Illya had discovered in the *Mairie* at Nice.

'There's no street between the two rows,' he told Solo in a low voice. 'The houses are all jumbled together and the entrance will be on the far side of the second row.'

'Okay,' Solo answered. 'We'll take it from two directions as we planned. You find your way to the entrance and get in on the ground floor; I'll go in from the top and see you later. We've got – let's see – twenty-seven minutes before the Trident is due. Keep in touch…'

With a wave of his hand, Illya melted into the shadows and vanished through a narrow gothic archway between two houses. Solo catfooted across the cobbles, ran lightly up a stone staircase leading to a vine-covered balcony and swung effortlessly over the iron railings to grasp a stackpipe.

He shinned up this to the guttering, hauled himself on to the roof, and advanced cautiously up the sloping tiles until he reached the wall of the row of houses behind.

Helga Grossbreitner's apartment was in a building twenty yards to his left. Now that he was closer, he could see through the picture window spanning the entire frontage a dim glow of red light. Faintly, from somewhere below, he felt the hum of a generator.

Another stackpipe took him to the second row of roofs. As soon as he reached the ridgepole, he stood upright and surveyed the scene. Around him a forest of chimney stacks, each covered by its little shelter of curved tiles, dotted the roofs of St. Paul. Slopes of every conceivable pitch and angle, gashed here and there by the narrow canyons of streets, stretched away and up towards the square-towered church topping the hill in the middle of the village. Beyond this jagged skyline pulsed the fitful glare of Roman candles, catherine wheels and set-pieces raining coloured fire. Behind, the headlights of distant cars probed the dark countryside falling towards the coast.

Two more roofs lay between him and his goal. With infinite care, he trod softly across the steep tiles, clambered down to the first roof, which was on a lower level, crossed it, pulled himself up on to the second, edged round a chimney stack, and dropped on to all fours as he approached the final slope. From what he could see, the antennae sprouting from Helga's roof were a good deal more sophisticated than would be required for reception of France's television services. Almost certainly, among the bizarre shapes of the ordinary domestic T.V. aerials which rose from the chimneys around him, was the evidence of a powerful transmitter and receiver on an international scale.

He eased himself over the parapet separating the two houses and paused. Helga's roof was of a shallower pitch – but to counteract this advantage, a broad modern chimney stack carrying six pots straddled half the width… and the remaining distance was obstructed by a sloping buttress leading down from the top to the gutter. Beyond the angle of stone, he could see the corner of a skylight set in the tiles. A faint light hazed the air above the glass.

Solo looked at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. Some where down below, Illya should be preparing to crash the entrance to the house.

He waited a minute and a half and then moved carefully to the edge of the roof. Now that he was nearer, he could see through the skylight into the attic below: part of a workbench, the edge of a chair, one side of a grey-steel console studded with switches and dials.

Averting his eyes from the dizzy drop to the street, he leaned his back against the slanting buttress and swung first one leg and then the other over to the far side. Then, automatically dusting off his jacket with one hand, he moved thankfully back towards the centre of the roof. The skylight was only ten feet away.

Something hard jammed into the small of his back. ‘Okay, bud,’ a voice rasped behind his ear. ‘Raise those hands…quick. One move and you’re dead…’

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

INDOOR FIREWORKS

A ROCKET burst with a thunderous detonation and released a *fleur-de-lys* of coloured streamers as Illya Kuryakin located the door of the house. It was a massive affair peppered with iron studs and recessed deeply into a stone arch. Curiously, there were no windows on the ground floor of the building – nor could he see the row of name tags and bells which customarily flank the entrances to apartment houses.

He had been going to ring the bell of the ground-floor flat if there had been one, with the intention of bluffing his way in on the pretext of having pressed the wrong button – and then improvising once he had got up the stairs. Now, however, he reconsidered: it looked as though any other apartments in the building might be a blind. Probably the whole place belonged to THRUSH. He examined the archway and the small porch behind it. Concealed among the ornamentations of the stonework was a diminutive circle of ground glass. A matching circle glinted dully on the opposite side of the opening. Presumably, once anyone crossed the threshold and broke the 'magic eye' beam which spanned the space between them, a photo-electric cell would actuate some kind of warning… perhaps a closed-circuit television camera – yes: the porch was roofed with tiles of bottle glass. One of them would be a hidden lens.

Kuryakin looked up and down the narrow street. On both sides, the ancient houses lay dark and silent. He had not seen a soul since he entered the village. The roadway was only six feet wide. The house opposite the THRUSH headquarters seemed to be some kind of gallery: there were paintings displayed in a window. From beneath a balcony on the first floor projected a stout wooden beam supporting a rustic sign – and a few feet

from the end of the beam was the wall of the house he was trying to enter. If he could tightwalk to the end of the beam without falling, there was a wide window ledge opposite, a little higher up…

He crouched, flexed his muscles and sprang upwards. His outstretched finger tips brushed the wrought iron curlicues supporting the beam, but he was unable to grab hold of them. He tried a second time – and again his hands hit the iron without being high enough to curve around it.

Breathing hard, Illya waited until some set-piece over the roofs brightened the sky and then, gathering himself, leaped once more. This time his fingers curled over a loop of the ironwork and held. There was a wrench tearing at his hands and shoulders as his full weight dropped earthwards – but he hung on. Swinging back and forth with gathering momentum, he finally managed to hook one foot into another curlicue and from there levered himself painfully to the balcony.

After a pause to regain his breath, he stepped out on to the wooden beam. It was about two inches wide – and fortunately it was flat rather than rounded. Providing he could keep his balance…

Bringing one foot up behind the other – for he dare not risk overbalancing by crossing them – he inched out from the balcony towards the other side of the street.

In the occasional flickers of reflected light, the cobbles gleamed fifteen feet below. When he was about half way along, the beam creaked and shifted slightly. He swayed, sawing with outstretched arms on either side to preserve his balance. Another two feet only…but would the beam hold? For the further away from the balcony he got, the greater the leverage on the fixing points.

Eighteen inches to go – and again the beam creaked, more loudly this time. The sign hanging below it swung once to and fro, faintly squealing its iron hooks and eyes.

Six inches…There was a rending sound, a splintery crack. As the beam sank beneath him, Illya launched himself forwards and outwards, his hands desperately groping for the wide sill under the window opposite. His forearms struck the stone shelf hard, and an instant later his knees and toes crashed numbingly into the wall below it. Panting, he tensed his biceps and held on. There was no clatter from the street: the beam and the ironwork

below it had loosened but not fallen; the sign still hung crazily above the cobbles.

The agent pulled himself up on to the sill and peered into the window. The room inside was in darkness.

Alarm wires led from the casement to a junction box along the wall. He pulled a flat box like a cigarette case from his pocket. Inside, two neat rows of shining implements were ranked. For a tenth of a second the beam of his flashlight brightened the embrasure. Then he worked industriously in the dark for two minutes: insulation was scraped away from one wire, a clip carrying a short lead was fastened on. The other end was attached to a miniature steel pin. There were two brief metallic taps as he drove the pin into the second wire by the frame.

Seconds later there was a sharp snap and the window swung inwards.

Illya swung his legs over the sill and dropped soundlessly to the floor inside. Apart from the humming of the generator, no sound broke the silence.

Again the thin ray of the flashlight lanced the dark. There was nothing in the small room but three rows of filing cabinets. The door was immediately opposite the window. He tiptoed around the end of the middle row and reached out for the handle…then paused, his hand arrested in mid-air.

From the matchbox-sized radio receiver in the breast pocket of his shirt, a call-sign was vibrating minutely against his chest. Solo was calling him…

Each of them was wearing an ornate dress ring which in fact was a tiny transmitter. The vibration meant that Solo had pressed the miniscule control at the side of his ring to initiate transmission. Illya fished the receiver from his pocket and held it to his ear, listening. Faintly, he heard the tail end of a sentence in a harsh and unfamiliar voice:

‘…tell me what you’re doing here, bud, or it’ll be the worse for you. C’mon – what were you doing prowling about our roof?’

Then the whisper of Solo’s voice, in a passable imitation of cockney: ‘All right, mister, I’ll come clean. I didn’t mean no harm. Honest – I was just hopin’ for a tickle. There’s plenty of nobs in these gaffs. I thought maybe I’d find an open skylight…you know: there might be a spot of tom or some pussy to lift. I wasn’t after your pad special, honest I wasn’t…’

‘Don’t give me that. I seen you before somewhere – Celeste: don’t we know this guy from some place?’

‘Could be’ – it was a woman’s voice speaking now – ‘The face seems kinda, well, familiar.’

‘That’s what I thought, but I can’t quite place it. Come on, you bastard: who sent you, and why are you here?’ There was the sound of a blow and a strangled exclamation from Solo – then the agent’s voice, panting:

‘Well done, little one. Go on. Do it again. It must be a nice change hitting a man bound to a chair – bit of a relief from the monotony of beating up elderly nurses and throwing hospital patients over cliffs.’

‘He does know something,’ the woman’s voice said. ‘Larsen – we’d better knock him off…’

‘Naw. We can’t do that without Number One’s permission – and she’s busy with the ray and can’t be disturbed. I’ll check with Fröhlich – and in the meantime, we can find out exactly what he knows. Let’s go get the dynamo and the clips. With a few hundred volts through you-know-where, he’ll soon talk. C’mon: he’s safe enough there…

There was a pause, and then, faintly, Solo’s voice: ‘Illya? Are you with me? I’m probably very distant because my arms are bound to the arms of a chair and I can’t get the mike in the ring near my mouth.’

Kuryakin lifted the ring on his own hand up to his mouth and pressed a tiny knob embedded in the scrollwork of the setting. ‘I hear you, Napoleon,’ he said softly. ‘What happened?’

‘I was sprung as I crossed the roof,’ the voice in the receiver whispered. ‘I would guess it was the same little dark villain you saw at the airport; the one who probably murdered Andrea Bergen and helped with the hospital job. The woman could be the one who knocked the magazines out of Sherry’s hand and distracted your attention while Shorty killed Andrea. They’ve gone now.’

‘I gathered that. Where are you?’

‘In an attic under the roof. I imagine the operations room is just below. Where are you?’

‘In a room on the first floor. You’ll be three storeys above me. Shall I come and get you out – or shall I deal with Helga first?’

‘What did you say? You’re very faint. My receiver’s in my breast pocket and I can hardly hear you.’

‘I said shall I deal with Helga or shall I come and get you?’

‘Try and get me first – we’ve got to stop them finding out who I am. If they do, they’ll call the whole thing off…and it’ll need two of us to deal with them: apart from these two, there’s Fröhlich, whoever he is, and possibly the two others involved in the hospital deal.’

‘I see what you mean. Whoever’s operating their weapon has got to continue thinking we’re both on that plane…I’ll be up.’

‘Okay. But hurry, Illya. The plane’s due in nine minutes…’

The Russian took an automatic from his hip pocket, fitted a long silencer over the barrel and pushed a clip of ammunition into the butt. Then, cautiously opening the door, he slid out on to the dark landing. Now that he was outside the room, he could hear the low murmur of voices from somewhere above.

Before venturing upstairs, though, he had to make sure of his line of retreat. Waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom, he finally made out an oblong of less intense darkness to his left. It was the entrance to a stone staircase leading down between arched plaster walls. Keeping to the outside of the tiled treads, he trod softly down.

As he rounded a bend in the stairway, he saw the origin of the faint illumination. A man sat with his back to the entrance in a small concierge’s cubicle, poring over a magazine in the dim light of a low-wattage red bulb. Although paying lip service to the edict that all houses in St. Paul should show no lights during the display, the THRUSH headquarters was maintaining a basic supply with its own generator.

To one side of the concierge’s desk was a fourteen-inch T.V. monitor screen flanked by a platen carrying warning lights and switches. The man, at second hand, was obviously the guardian of the front door.

Illya stole across the hall and paused in the doorway of the cubicle. The man had not moved. Engrossed in what he was reading, he was apparently mouthing to himself the words on the printed page as he laboriously followed the lines.

Illya raised his right arm, the hand held flat with the fingers extended. Abruptly, he swept the flat of the hand across and down to the nape of the

man’s neck in a *karate* chop.

The doorkeeper grunted once and slumped forwards over the desk.

Thumbing back his eyelid to make sure that he would take no part in the evening’s festivities for the next hour or so, Kuryakin raced back to the first floor and groped along the wall for the stairs leading up. He found them at the far end of the landing and climbed cautiously to the next storey. There were four doors, his exploring fingers discovered – two on each side of the passageway. Crouching, he peered through the keyhole of each in turn. Three of the rooms were in darkness. Through the fourth keyhole, a brighter light shone – and from behind the door he could hear voices raised in argument, among them those of the man and woman he had heard questioning Solo.

On the floor above, according to Solo himself, should be the operations room. He tiptoed up another flight of stairs.

The third floor of the house boasted only three doors. Two of them, on the side of the building nearest the street, stood open – to reveal in the intermittent reflection of fireworks admitted through the uncurtained windows a bathroom and what looked like a miniature laboratory. Behind the third, which was closed, lay the room with the picture window, the operations room from which four T.C.A. Tridents had been sent crashing to their doom…

From this landing – Illya saw in the light of a blue-green flare – only a ladder led upwards to the attics. Gun at the ready, he swarmed aloft and disappeared through the open trapdoor in the ceiling.

The crude Provençal armchair to which Solo was bound had its back to the door, and the first he knew of the Russian’s presence was the hand that fell warningly on his shoulder.

‘How long have we got?’ Solo whispered urgently as Illya sawed through the electric flex clamping his wrists, elbows, knees and ankles to the wooden arms and legs.

Kuryakin glanced at his watch. ‘The plane is due to land in five and a quarter minutes, Napoleon,’ he said.

Solo rose to his feet, massaging the life back into his cramped limbs. ‘God, we’ll have to move fast,’ he said. ‘And we can’t afford to go into that operations room before we’ve accounted for the others. How many are there left, do you know?’

‘The man and woman who were here with you. Fröhlich – and probably one other. I’ve already – er – looked after one guard on the front door.’

‘Good. But the trouble is, we’ll have to do it all in complete silence – the slightest sign of a struggle would tip Helga off…’

Together, they turned towards the door.

Larsen stood there with a Luger, the big gun steady in his dirty hand.

‘Okay, you guys,’ he snarled. ‘So now it’s a confederate, is it? Back up there – *now.* We’ll see just who the hell you are…’

Balletically, Illya kicked straight-legged almost in reflex. The tip of his toe caught the barrel, and the heavy pistol went spinning across the room. As the small, dark man’s mouth opened wide in dismay, the Russian chopped flathanded at his throat, catching him viciously across the Adam’s apple as the shout was forming. Solo made a dive to his left and caught the Luger before it could crash to the floor.

Larsen lurched forward, retching for breath, as Illya slammed a left to the pit of his stomach. The dark man doubled up. As his head sank down, Kuryakin grasped hold of the ears and brought his knee sharply up to connect sickeningly with Larsen’s face.

The THRUSH man sagged, the two agents catching his inert body and easing it into a chair before it could hit the floor.

‘A pity,’ Kuryakin said as they lowered themselves down the ladder. ‘I dislike violence…’

Outside the door where the rest of the gang were talking on the floor below, they waited to listen. The Trident was due in four minutes.

‘Our timing had better be good on this,’ Solo whispered. ‘We’ve got to give the stuff time to work – and still be in there ready to catch them before they fall!’ He produced from a shoulder holster a gun with a long, thin barrel no thicker than a pencil and poked it carefully through the keyhole. Flipping open a cover on the single chamber, he slid in a fragile glass capsule about half the length of a cigarette, closed the cover and pulled the trigger.

There was a faint snap as the powerful spring propelled the capsule into the room on the other side of the door. Illya looked at the luminous face of his watch, waiting while twenty-five seconds ticked away. The intonation of the voices in the room altered, becoming slurred and thick.

‘Now!’ the Russian called, twisting the handle and throwing open the door.

Holding their breath, the two agents moved quietly and quickly into the room. The shattered fragments of the capsule lay on the tile floor just below a table spread with cards. Two large men were on their feet, swaying drunkenly from side to side. Solo caught one just as he was about to crash face downwards across the table; Illya seized the other in the act of hauling a gun from his hip pocket, and waited the few seconds needed before the nerve gas completed its action. Then, together, they lowered the unconscious men to the floor and hurried back to the landing.

‘Forty seconds,’ Kuryakin gasped, dragging the air gratefully back into his lungs. ‘Anyone that says he can hold his breath for two minutes must be crazy!’

‘You can say that again,’ Solo panted. ‘But what about the woman: she wasn’t there.’

The Russian laid a hand on his arm. From two storeys below came the sound of a cistern emptying. A door closed.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Solo and Illya melted back to the floor above and slipped through the open door of the bathroom. The footsteps traversed the landing they had just left and climbed the stairs towards them. In a moment, the woman Celeste appeared, walked along the passageway, opened the door of the operations room opposite, and went in.

A moment later, with Illya close behind him, Solo reopened the door and stepped quietly into the room.

It was a strange sight that met their eyes. Workbenches packed with electronic equipment ran the length of the two side walls. Indicator lights, dials and knurled control knobs studded a panel fronting a complex of valves and intricate wiring; from a curved tube of glass spiralling around a metal core, heavy-insulation leads coiled in every direction. On one side, lights gleamed from the complications of a powerful transmitter.

At the far end of the room, the picture window stood wide to the warm night. In the centre of it, the tawny gold of Helga Grossbreitner’s hair was burnished by the light from a red bulb overhead. She sat behind a battery of equipment mounted on a heavy tripod and pointing out of the window towards the sea. Basically, this consisted of a four-foot-long centre section

resembling a triple gun barrel, with a square box covered in switches and leads at the operating end and an attachment rather like a magnified camera lens with a long hood at the far end. Immediately above this device was a smaller three-barrelled affair – the three tubes like a trio of telescopes of unequal length. Into the slimmest of these, obviously some kind of aiming sight, the girl was squinting as she turned a wheel aligning the two sets of equipment. At one side, the greenish luminance of a radar screen showed a moving blip representing the plane whose actual landing lights they could see through the window as it flew low over the sea towards the airport.

Celeste stood behind, gazing out across the dark countryside.

There was a muttered word of satisfaction from Helga. A hairline on the radar screen was coinciding with the nose of the moving blip. Her left hand threw a heavy master switch on the control box. A deep humming mingled with electrical crackles filled the room. One of the barrels glowed red.

Solo stepped swiftly forwards, reached over her shoulder, and twirled the wheel, canting the six barrels skywards.

‘A three-way laser with a ruby rod range-finder allied to conventional radar – very ingenious, Helga,’ he said softly.

The girl spun round in her chair, her eyes flashing fire. ‘Solo!’ she exclaimed furiously. ‘You! But you were supposed to be—’

‘On the plane you were about to bring down. I know – but we thought we’d let this be the one that got away. Too many people have died already, my dear. You’ve had a long enough run as it is.’

As the blonde sprang to her feet, her beautiful face a mask of rage, the silenced gun in Illya’s hand spat flame. Before the cork-like plop of the explosion had died away, Celeste pitched forward and clattered to the floor, one hand still grasping the butt of the tiny automatic she had been trying to pull from the top of her stocking.

‘It’s all right – it’s only a sleep dart,’ Kuryakin rapped. ‘Now…move away from that laser and put your hands up, quick!’

The girl moved like lightning. Spinning the three big barrels to put a different one in place between the two ends of the equipment, she swung the whole apparatus round on the tripod so that the business end was pointing into the room.

‘Down!’ Illya yelled, hurling himself to the floor as the invisible beam swept over his head. Solo dropped like a stone and rolled under one of the benches.

There was a brilliant blue flash as the revolving equipment came to rest and the beam stayed on the big transmitter. Smoke poured from the bench and the radio chassis, the plaster of the wall crumbled, and an instant later the whole side of the room was a mass of flame as the wooden laths behind caught fire.

Helga Grossbreitner leaped over Illya’s prone figure, dodged round the beam and ran for the door. As Kuryakin took a snap shot at her and missed, he saw in the light of the flames a small alcove to one side of the door. On a wheeled operating table in the recess, lashed to the chromium rails of the trolley and gagged with insulating tape, lay the almost naked unconscious figure of Sheridan Rogers.

‘Sherry!’ Illya shouted. ‘Get her out of there, Napoleon. I’ll look after the woman…’ He struggled to his feet, bent double to run under the laser beam and made for the doorway through which Helga had vanished.

Before he was half way across the room, there was a low rumbling and armoured steel shutters dropped heavily down to blank off both door and window…

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ALL THE FUN OF THE FAIR

ILLYA launched himself at the doorway and beat upon the smooth metal curtain – but the armoured shutter ran tightly in steel channels and would not move. Behind him, Solo ran the wheeled operating table out of the alcove and away from the flames, wrestling with the thin cords binding Sherry Rogers to the frame. The fierce flare of light emphasized the hollows of her supple body, sculpturing the contours.

Choking in the smoke which was now filling the room, Kuryakin was back at the laser. Throwing off the master switch, he wheeled the apparatus round to point at the steel curtained door. ‘If the barrel in position is a ruby rod laser,’ he gasped, ‘it should be able to cut through that shutter – providing it’s not more than three eighths of an inch thick…Stand back, Napoleon: we’ll have a go!’

He flicked the switch back to the ‘on’ position. Immediately, there was a blinding flash of crimson light and a shower of sparks from the metal surface walling them in. In less than a second, the concentrated energy of the laser beam had punched a hole in the steel. Shepherding the long barrels up and around by means of the control wheel, Illya slowly carved with the beam an irregular circle about two feet in diameter. In the confined space, the heat of the blazing wall, the roar of the flames and the acrid attack of the smoke were almost unbearable. The two agents were bathed in sweat by the time Kuryakin had completed the circle and the roundel of steel inside it fell outwards with a dull clang.

‘You go after her, Illya,’ Solo yelled. ‘I’ll get these birds out of here if I can and join you later.’ As Kuryakin dived head first through the ragged

hole in the shutter, he was dragging the unconscious figures of Celeste and Sherry towards the door.

On the landing, Illya paused to drag a few gulps of cold air deep into his tortured lungs. Which way had Helga Grossbreitner gone? Up or down?

For a second, he paused, irresolute. Then a faint draft from the open trapdoor in the ceiling decided him. He sprang for the ladder and climbed rapidly to the attics.

Wisps of smoke curled from the landing walls and the wooden floor of the rooms under the roof was already ablaze. Lifting his feet high to avoid the flames, the Russian dashed past the figure of Larsen, still slumped in the chair where they had left him, and jumped on to the grey steel console Solo had seen from the roof. Above his head, the skylight yawned open to the sky.

Reaching up, Illya grasped the edge and hauled himself to the tiles.

Helga Grossbreitner was three roofs away, poised on the edge of a six-foot gap where an alley ran between two houses. She was wearing knee-high boots, skin-tight black leather pants and a white shirt – and her ripe figure was silhouetted against a strange orange glow which suffused the sky beyond the far end of the village.

As Illya hastened crabwise after her across the tiled slopes, dodging chimney stacks and television aerials and water tanks, the glow deepened to scarlet and then began to flicker as great clouds of smoke bellied across the skyline. The firework display was over and the symbolic reconstruction of the sack of St. Paul by the Saracens had begun.

The girl hesitated a moment longer and then gathered herself and jumped the gap. She landed awkwardly, lost her footing, fell, and slid almost to the guttering before her desperately scrabbling hands found enough leverage among the curved tiles to arrest her progress.

Catfooted, the Russian raced across the roofs to close the gap between them. The girl must have heard his hurrying footsteps as she struggled to her feet, for she paused, looked back over her shoulder, and then raised her right arm in his direction. An orange flower bloomed suddenly from her hand. Illya ducked back behind a chimney, listening to the simultaneous crack of the explosion and the shrill whine of the bullet as it hit a coping and ricocheted away into the night.

After a second, he peered cautiously around the brickwork. Helga was just disappearing over the edge of the roof on to a fire escape.

He set off again at a run, taking the space over the alleyway in his stride, almost losing his balance as he landed, and then, righting himself, dashing on to the far end of the roof and the fire escape. As he looked over, there was a flash and a crack from below. A bullet spanged off the iron staircase just below the level of the roof.

Having waited a moment, he raised his head and gazed over the parapet again. The sky over the rooftops was a deep crimson now, a menacing glare reflected fitfully from the dense clouds of smoke billowing from the ramparts. In the blood-red light he located Helga standing at the foot of the fire escape – and once more flame blossomed twice from the gun in her hand. He drew back, looked over again, and for the third time a bullet sent him scurrying back into cover like a tortoise into its shell. Obviously the girl was prepared to keep him tied down there.

His own gun, loaded with sleep darts, was useless at this range. He would have to try and outflank the girl. Worming his way back, he inched down to the guttering at the side of the house. The wall was covered thickly with the branches of an ancient vine.

Groping about in the leaves until he found the main stem, he seized hold of the gnarled wood, swung his legs over the gutter, and began to lower himself, hand over hand, slowly to the ground four storeys below. Dust, insects and small twigs showered upon his head and threatened to choke him as he descended, but at last his exploring toe discovered firm ground and he found himself in a small walled garden.

Skirting an ornamental pond, he pushed through a rank of dwarf cypresses, stepped up on to a garden roller and straddled the six-foot wall. On the far side was a small cobbled square. The tight, shining hemispheres of Helga Grossbreitner’s leather-clad rump were just disappearing through an archway opposite.

Illya looked back and up along the roofline of the houses he had just left. From the upper windows of the THRUSH headquarters, flames and smoke were streaming. As he watched, a shower of sparks burst through the skylight, and a moment later a column of fire exploded into the night and licked hungrily at the sky. He wondered if Solo had managed to get the

women safely out of the burning building, shrugged, and dropped quietly to the ground.

Through the archway, a flight of stone stairs led down between tall, narrow buildings to a street.

In the nightmare light he hurried down, flattened himself against a wall, and peered round the comer of the building. The street was obviously one of the village's main thoroughfares for, although it was only about eight feet wide, he could see in the reflected red glow of the floodlights a succession of antique shops, boutiques, souvenir kiosks and galleries crammed with chocolate-box paintings. As far as he could see, it was empty – but from the far side of a rise in the roadway came the clatter of running feet.

Illya dashed up the slope and paused at the top. From here, the street dipped down again between rows of gimmicky 'restored' houses and then forked – one leg curving away to the right to join the ramparts, the other plunging down to a tunnel-like mediaeval gateway leading to the outside world. For the first time, too, there were people: several residents were climbing the hill towards him on the way back to their houses, and there was quite a crowd among the café tables on the battlement above the gate. Helga was running. A strand of her golden hair had worked loose from the chignon and streamed over her shoulder as she pelted down the incline and vanished through the arched gateway.

As Kuryakin set off after her, he realized that the display must now be over. The red floodlights were out, the smoke was blowing away, and from outside the walls of the town a swelling murmur of applause from thousands of sightseers posted along the terraced vineyards and orange groves grew and grew. There was another sound too, he realized as he ran down the slope towards the gate – nearer and more urgent: the sound of many voices calling, laughing, shouting in a confused babble just beyond the ancient walls.

A moment later, he burst out from the vaulted tunnel into a scene of extraordinary gaiety. A Provençal fair filled the small *place* outside the gate usually reserved for the parking of cars and games of *pétanque.* Booths, kiosks and sideshows jammed the spaces between the buttresses of the old rampart, sprawled across the open space under the plane trees and spilled over into the narrow roadway between La Résidence and La Colombe d'Or, St. Paul's world famous hotels. Around and between them seethed a vast

throng of people hurling coconuts, buying tickets, pitching quoits, munching candyfloss and ice cream, and packing the counters of shooting galleries in flickering torchlight.

But of Helga Grossbreitner there was no sign.

Illya clattered to a halt at the edge of the crowd, scanning the myriad faces with an exasperated frown. Trying to locate a blonde in black trousers and a white shirt among such a press of holidaymakers was hopeless.

He was about to plunge into the maelstrom when there was a shout above and behind him. Solo and Sherry Rogers were climbing down a stone stairway from the top of the rampart. They presented an arresting sight: the Chief Enforcement Officer of U.N.C.L.E. was soot-streaked and dishevelled, his collar tom and his jacket split; and the girl looked almost comically ill-dressed in a skirt and blouse several sizes too large for her.

‘Where is she?’ Solo panted as they came up to Kuryakin. ‘Not among that lot, I hope?’

The Russian nodded unhappily. ‘She kept me at bay with an automatic,’ he said. ‘And by the time I’d made a detour to outflank her, she was just that little bit too far ahead…You made out all right at the house?’

‘Yes. It was a bit of a struggle, but we made it. I got Sherry and Celeste out first and then went back for the doorkeeper you slugged. The two plug-uglies we put to sleep had already come to and hopped it.’

‘And Larsen?’

Solo looked at the ground. ‘Pity about him,’ he said soberly. ‘But he was at least a quadruple murderer. By the time I’d tied up Celeste and the doorkeeper, called up Station M to ask for the Sûreté boys to come and pick them up, and borrowed some of Celeste’s clothes for Sherry, the top two storeys were a wall of fire…’

He looked back at the battlements. Above the irregular line of roofs, the sky flickered orange in imitation of the display which had so recently finished. Faintly above the hubbub of the crowd, they heard from the far side of the village the hee-haw bray of a fire engine.

‘Never mind,’ Illya said. ‘I suppose we had better plunge in among all this and try to find her. We’d better split up…’

Slowly, they forged in among the chattering, laughing crowd, swollen to saturation point now by an ever-growing stream of sightseers flooding

down the narrow approach road from the terraces surrounding the town. They were jostled, pushed, shouldered aside, jammed inextricably in phalanxes of people between the booths, as the strident cries of barkers and the good-natured chaff of tourists in a dozen languages swelled and crashed around them. At one point, when Illya had stopped by a sideshow where people bought a handful of numbered tickets rolled into tubes in the hope of winning a raffle prize, Sheridan Rogers approached him and plucked at his sleeve.

'Illya,' she said nervously. 'I have to explain – I'm so sorry. That dreadful evening in Haut-de-Cagnes…I'm so ashamed…I was drugged, you see. And then they…they hypnotized me to…to behave like that. Oh, it was awful…'

The Russian looked down at the girl's white, strained face. 'That's all right, Sherry,' he said uncomfortably. 'Forget it, please. I should have realized they were trying either to frighten us off you, or to make us think *you* were the weak link in the T.C.A. chain…'

'Now roll up, ladies and gentlemen!' a huge woman with hoop earrings was bawling in front of the booth. 'Five tickets for one franc. Any ticket with a five or a nine at the end of a number wins a prize. Roll up, roll up and try your luck!'

'Did they harm you – back there in the house?' Illya asked.

'No. They just kept me tied to that table and gave me an injection every few hours. They were going to…they wanted to…' she broke off and began to cry.

'*Every* ticket ending in a five or a nine wins a prize – There! See: the little girl has won the giant teddy bear!'

A child with pigtails handed over a winning ticket and staggered away hugging the huge toy, her eyes wide in disbelief, as Kuryakin put his arm around Sherry's shoulders. They moved on through the fair, anxiously scanning the faces in the light of the flares.

'Break the bottles with the metal *boules*, ladies and gentlemen! Three broken bottles doubles your money. Six shots a franc…'

'Coconuts, fine coconuts. Knock off the ones you fancy…'

'Try your aim with the six-shot repeaters! Five bulls wins a prize – come on, now: only one franc fifty for half a dozen shots…'

They stopped by the shooting gallery as Solo forced his way through a knot of German tourists arguing over a quoit-throwing prize and came towards them. ‘It’s no good,’ he shouted over the din. ‘There’s not a chance in hell of locating her among this crowd. We’ll have to—’

Suddenly, Sherry Rogers screamed, pointing frantically over his shoulder.

Among the cardboard targets and ping-pong balls balancing on jets of water, Helga had appeared behind the counter at the far end of the booth. The long-nosed automatic in her hand was pointing straight at Solo.

Illya exploded into action. Hurling Solo aside as the gun – spat flame, he snatched a target rifle from a blue-chinned Provençal youth who had just loaded it and snapped three quick shots at the girl from THRUSH. Helga disappeared through the curtain at the back of the gallery.

‘Missed!’ Kuryakin called in exasperation. ‘These fairground guns all have bent barrels! Come on – she went this way…’

Through the crowd now scattering with astonishment and fear, they pushed their way towards the back of the booth. Helga’s shot had passed over Solo’s shoulder and severed the cord tethering a mountain of gas-filled balloons, and these, suddenly released, were now bobbing and swaying in bright blobs of colour over the heads of the throng.

‘Come on,’ Illya yelled. ‘This way. Over here!’

They fought their way through the jam of bodies, dodged round a blaring hurdy-gurdy and ran over a coconut-shy. Solo caught one of the hurled wooden balls one-handed as he leaped across and lobbed it politely back to the astonished thrower.

Helga was only a few yards away. As they sprinted towards her, she pulled to the ground a pyramid of canned food outside a food stall and sent them skating on the rolling tins.

As Solo picked himself up, a heavy blow on the shoulder knocked him to the ground again. The girl was behind a pile of metal *boules*, hurling the steel spheres viciously in their direction.

‘Keep down, Sherry, he called. ‘You could get hurt. Illya! Pick ’em up and throw them back!’

They gathered up the heavy balls and began to shy them back, flushing Helga out from behind the pile and forcing her to retreat among the other

booths. Stubbornly, she fought a rearguard action back through the fair towards the ramparts, fending them off with coconuts, cheap crockery skittles, woolly animals – anything she could lay her hands on that could be thrown. And as they went, the crowd parted before them in amazement and then closed in again behind as though nothing had happened.

But finally the girl was clear of the last stall and running strongly towards the gate. ‘After her,’ Solo shouted. ‘She’s heading for the ramparts again. How many shots has she left in that gun, Illya?’

‘She’s used six now,’ the Russian panted. ‘Another couple and – if the gun’s the model I think it is – she’ll have to put in a fresh clip.’

They piled through the archway and laboured up the cobbled slope in pursuit, the watchers on the battlements gazing at them in astonishment as they ran past.

Once they left the narrow main street and swerved on to the wider roadway circling the top of the ramparts, it became suddenly quiet and dark. The torchlight and the noises of the fair were behind them. There was an acrid smell of used gunpowder lingering among the remains of the firework set-pieces fixed to the walls.

Helga’s white shirt was a blur in the darkness charting the progress of her pounding feet. Once she stopped, turned, and fired quickly twice in succession – but the bullets whined harmlessly over their heads.

Solo glanced at Illya, who nodded and increased his pace. ‘She can hardly reload while she’s running,’ he gasped. ‘Let’s close up and see if we can corner her.’

They dashed on. And then, rounding a curve in the road, came suddenly to a halt. The walls of the town bulged abruptly here into two turret-like belvederes. As they stood in the nearer of these, Helga Grossbreitner faced them across the gap from behind the parapet of the further one.

‘All right, Solo,’ she called, her body a lighter patch against the dark. ‘This is as far as you go. I’m out of range of your sleep dart toy – and this is another gun in my hand, in case you’re making foolish plans based on my having to reload. You and your friends stay right there.’

‘Put it down, Helga,’ Solo called back quietly. ‘There’s three of us and you don’t have a chance. The whole place will be swarming with Sûreté and Deuxième Bureau men at any moment.’

‘Don’t give me that, lover boy. Don’t kid yourself you’re good enough to take on THRUSH and win!…I’m going over this wall. There will be a car waiting for me on the La Colle road. And tomorrow I shall be making my report to the Council. After that, you’d better watch out. Your life won’t be worth a nickel…’

‘Why don’t you shoot now?’

The girl hesitated, a stray beam of light from somewhere glinting on the barrel of the gun in her hand. ‘I…have my reasons,’ she said. ‘Besides I’m not an executioner: we have special people for that…Now I’m going over. And I warn you: any heads looking over the battlements after me will be silhouetted. I shan’t hesitate to fire then.’

‘Helga…

‘I mean it, lover boy. Just watch out after tomorrow, that’s all.’

Dimly, they saw her climb on to the parapet. And then suddenly, in what seemed a flash of blinding brilliance, all the lights of the town came on at once. Windows, doorways, balconies and streets sprang into instant relief against the night as some municipal official somewhere threw a master switch.

Taken utterly by surprise, Helga gasped, looked upwards into the pitiless glare of a street light immediately over the belvedere, and lost her footing on the crumbling stone.

For an eternal moment, they saw her poised over the abyss. Then, with a strangled cry, she disappeared backwards over the wall.

A long time later, it seemed, there were two dreadful thuds followed by the sound of something heavy crashing among branches.

And after that there was silence.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE FINGER IN THE SKY

‘BUT, Illya, I don’t understand how they did it. How exactly did the laser thing work?’

Kuryakin smiled fondly at Sherry Rogers. The network of fine creases wrinkling her nose when she grinned fascinated him. ‘It is extremely interesting, Sherry,’ he said earnestly. ‘You know what laser really stands for?’

‘Indeed, I do not.’

‘It stands for Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation…l-a-s-e-r.’

‘Great. So how did they shoot down planes with it?’

‘Well, you know ordinary light, ordinary white light, is made of energy of many different wavelengths? And all these different-sized waves bounce about in all directions?’

‘As a matter of fact I did know that.’

‘Good. Then you’ll realize at once why a laser is so powerful, when I tell you it emits only *coherent* light.’

‘I’m sorry. I…’

Kuryakin laughed aloud. ‘Coherent light is light in which all the wavelengths are exactly the same – and not only that: the individual light rays, all of the same wavelength or colour, all march as it were in step, trough to trough and crest to crest. Somebody once compared this kind of light and ordinary light as being like a platoon of well-drilled soldiers in comparison with a disorderly mob.’

‘Yes, yes, Illya. But—’

‘When light waves march in step like this, such frequency-coherent light can perform astonishing feats. This is because the way a laser *makes* the light causes the rays to come out parallel, instead of radiating from a point, as they do with conventional light sources. And since the energy of the rays is not dissipated by the beam spreading out, there’s a very intense concentration of energy within a very small area. Thus lasers can cut holes in metal, weld things together—’

‘Illya…How can a beam of light cut holes in metal?’

‘Because light’s a form of energy – and as I told you, lasers concentrate it within a tiny space, because of the way they’re made.’

‘All right,’ Sherry Rogers said resignedly, lighting another cigarette and stirring her coffee with an indulgent smile. ‘How *are* they made then?’

They were sitting at a table beneath a striped umbrella on the airport terrace, waiting for the Air France Boeing which was to take Solo back to New York to report to Waverly. Since Sherry had been given 48 hours leave – and since Kuryakin was still owed the leave which had been interrupted when the assignment began – he had decided to stay in Nice with her for the remainder of his time off.

‘Originally,’ the Russian continued remorselessly, ‘lasers were made by putting a rod-shaped crystal of synthetic ruby inside a xenon flashtube – the kind of thing they use for an electronic camera flash. When the ruby is irradiated by the flash, the light raises the energy of one of the components of the synthetic stone…kind of supercharges it…until, by a molecular process you would hardly understand, it bursts out of one end of the tube in the form of the laser beam I have described.’

‘And it was one of these which brought down the planes?’

‘No. It was a ruby laser which Helga used to set fire to the room – and which I used to burn the hole in the steel shutter. But there were two other kinds of laser in the apparatus also. Remember the thing had three barrels?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘The one they used to bring down the planes was a so-called “cold” laser – a gas laser using a mixture of helium and neon at very low pressure. The irradiation in this case comes from an ordinary radio transmitter: you probably saw the one they had on the bench. It works rather like fluorescent

light, in a long thin tube of Pyrex…but this was a rather special one: there was a third gas mixed in the tube, which gave the beam very – shall we say? – *special* qualities.'

'And those were?' Sherry asked idly, waving to Solo and Matheson, who had appeared at the far end of the terrace and were making their way through the tables towards them.

'The beam – in the infra-red range, like the others, and therefore invisible to the eye – passes through many normal substances without burning them. But it is warm enough to affect Toridium, a soft, heavy metal tremendously subject to heat changes. And there is a Toridium core in the memory unit of the altitude stage of the Murchison-Spears box.'

'And so when the beam fell on the box…?'

'The Toridium expanded, altering the altitude reading of the equipment and causing the controls of the plane to change in such a way as to make it crash. Once the beam is switched off, though, the metal returns to normal and shows no sign that it has been tampered with.'

'And the adjustment is so fine that the beam would affect gear in front of the aircraft but not at the back?'

'Up to a range of seven or eight miles – yes.'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo,' Matheson called, dropping into a vacant chair at the table. 'Have you solved the secret of the secret weapon yet, young man? There was hardly anything of the bally thing left after that fire. My chaps don't know where to start.'

'It was very ingenious, really,' Illya said seriously. 'A triple barrelled affair. The operator could select an optically pumped ruby laser, a gas laser using a mixture of helium, neon and phrenium, or an injection laser – the usual forward-biased semiconductor diode of gallium arsenide.'

'In a cryostat, I suppose?'

'Yes – a double bottle of liquid helium and liquid nitrogen. I imagine THRUSH used it for long range communications.'

'Enough of this love talk,' Sherry Rogers interrupted sweetly, her nose wrinkling at Illya. 'Mr Solo has a plane to catch, and we have a holiday to take…'

'It's all very well for you people, lazing in the sun,' Napoleon Solo said crossly as they said goodbye in the departure lounge. 'I've got to go back

and make out my report. I should have realized it was Helga, the moment that Mustang came at me on the sidewalk of Fifth Avenue: she was the only one who could have known I'd be leaving the building at that time…I'm not sure I approve of all this intercontinental dependency; it's most unsettling, being whisked from country to country like this. Especially when you've lost the girl…'

He was still looking disgruntled as he settled himse1f comfortably into the seat of the luxurious Air France 707 and fastened his safety belt.

'If you please, monsieur,' a husky voice breathed in his ear. 'You take something for the take-off, no?'

The French stewardess holding out the tray of chewing gum and boiled sweets was young and slim. Beneath the dark blue uniform cap, raven hair framed a face that was all lustrous eyes and full, wide lips.

'You permit, monsieur, that I sit beside you during takeoff?' she enquired, sinking into the empty place beside him and picking up the two halves of the belt.

'All the way across, baby,' Napoleon Solo said feelingly. 'All the way… Maybe there's something to be said for N.A.T.O. after all…And *vive l'Air France*, too!'

The silver plane hurtled along the runway, soared into the air over the speedboats creaming the Baie des Anges, banked steeply, and climbed rapidly until it was lost to view in the intense cobalt of the sky.

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Five major air crashes in two months—the cause of all of them a complete mystery. In each case the plane's instruments were working perfectly, the crew was in command and ground-control in contact. Then the craft would suddenly nose-dive into the runway as it came in to land, killing most of the inhabitants. Those who weren't killed outright die mysterious deaths shortly after.

The men from U.N.C.L.E. make a dash from New York to Nice to track down the THRUSH agents behind the monstrous master-plan that is gradually becoming clearer. But not before Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo are betrayed by the ones they trust and nearly annihilated by a desperate enemy . . .